



ALL WOMEN WERE SUCKERS FOR HIM—
A NOVEL OF THE SHAMELESS THIRTIES — 25¢

The **CONTINENTAL TOUCH**



JOSEPH
WECHSBERG

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THE STORY OF A HEEL—

AND THE WOMAN HE COULDN'T HAVE

Louis was an international heel. He learned about love from his father's mistress. He chiseled his way from Paris to Prague. He made suckers of women, especially other men's wives. And he loved every shameless minute of his money-grabbing days and boudoir-prowling nights.

But one day the sleek hand kisses, the bows, the slick words didn't work. For Louis met a woman whose heart was no bigger than his own—that is, if he had one at all. And thus began the oldest struggle known—the battle between a man and a woman: the man soulless and calculating, the woman hot and untouchable as a flame!

Joseph Wechsberg . . .

won a Houghton Mifflin Company Fellowship Award in 1943 with his first book, *Looking For a Bluebird*, and has been a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* and other magazines. He has had a lively career as lawyer, ship's musician, world traveler, croupier and newspaperman.

**the
CONTINENTAL
TOUCH**

**Joseph
Wechsberg**

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1

IT HAD BEEN after the big flower parade, the Highlight of a Brilliant Riviera Season, as tomorrow's papers would say, but there had already been the scent of withered flowers in the air, and the street cleaners were sweeping heaps of roses, mimosas and carnations into their two-wheel carts. Even years later, when Kamin was thinking of Louis, the picture of the street cleaners between heaps of dead flowers would uncontrollably come to his mind.

Kamin had tried to turn away but it had been too late. Louis had seen him. Now he came toward Kamin, smiling, both hands outstretched. He seemed to be delighted, simply delighted. Louis could always make you feel that meeting you was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him.

"Great, *great*, *GREAT!* It's wonderful seeing you again!"

Louis seemed to be bouncing slightly on his elevator shoes. Kamin sighed. Perhaps he should have been pleased to meet Louis again, after all these years, but he had never been good at pretending.

"It's a small world," Louis was saying. He would always say a cliché. He had clichés ready for every suitable occasion and hour of the day. They were sitting on a bench on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, the sunshine had the intoxicating warmth of a mellow Bordeaux wine though it was only February, the sky was absurdly azure and the shadows were softly black; the girls were very pretty in their light, almost transparent printed dresses that fitted closely, lovingly, to their breasts, hips, legs, but all that Louis could think of was that it was a small world.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" Louis asked. He

didn't wait for an answer—he never did—and said, "I've spent a good deal of time in Monte."

He said "Monte." It showed that you belonged. Like calling a celebrity by his first name. Tourists would always say "Monte Carlo."

From the sea came the smell of salt and sea grass. The rose-bushes in the municipal gardens, across from the Place Masséna, were in full bloom. There was still an irresponsible parade mood in the air. It disorganized, derailed the train of your thoughts. You wanted to kiss a blonde, write a poem or run away, clad only in pajamas. At the Casino de la Jetée Promenade the orchestra was playing "Ain't She Sweet?" and "Hallelujah," and "I've Got Plenty of Nothin'." The songs were old but it always took the French musicians a few years to pick up the American hits.

"Somehow I don't get any kick out of gambling," Louis said. He slapped a roll of hundred-franc bills against the palm of his hand.

"Did you win?" Kamin said.

"No. I had two rolls like that the day before yesterday. I'm always losing at the roulette table. Guess I'm too lucky with the girls."

He wasn't boasting. He had always been lucky with the girls. They liked him or they hated him, but they always went after him. Louis Dellinick was taut and tall. Kamin often wondered why Louis wore the invisible high heels that were carefully concealed inside his custom-built elevator shoes. Perhaps he wanted to be a little taller than his height, which must have been six feet one. That was the trouble with Louis; he always wanted to be a little taller than he was.

"By the way," he said. "My name here is Delinc. D-e-l-i-n-c." He pronounced it French, very nasal. "Sounds almost French, doesn't it?"

"Almost," Kamin admitted.

"It's shorter, more convenient than Dellinick. I was getting sorry for the bellboys, telephone operators and desk clerks that had such a tough time spelling my name."

It was a doubtful motive for the change; Louis had never cared for bellboys, desk clerks and similar underdogs. But then, one was never quite sure with Louis. Kamin and Louis had been together in school, seeing one another almost every day for eight long years, but Louis was always unpredictable. Kamin had found it difficult to feel for him the frank and easy familiarity that usually exists between classmates.

"I met Doctor Halick last night in the Casino," Louis said. "He was playing all the time on *quatre premiers*, 0, 1, 2, 3. His wife was there too. Looking for a man, as usual."

Doctor Halik had been the best-known abortionist in their home town. He had made more money than all the reputable surgeons. Every winter he would close his office for a month and come to the Riviera. He had a theory, documented by his own private statistics, that there were fewer abortions during the winter seasons.

"It's too cold outdoors," he would say. "Most accidents happen outdoors in spring and summer."

Doctor Halik would spend four weeks in Monte Carlo, losing his year's earnings around the roulette tables, while his wife was trying to lose her amorous pressure. Kamin vaguely remembered Doctor Halik's wife. She was a mellow, voluptuous blonde.

"She's got the most provoking hips," Louis said, staring wistfully into space. "Seeing her walk by, one can almost hear the bedsprings creak. I danced with her last night. The way that woman dances! I had to stop twice."

That was the way it went with Louis. You hadn't seen him for years, he was delighted, simply delighted to meet you, and then he would talk of Doctor Halik's wife.

"They lived in Monte," he said. "In a small pension in Beau Soleil. American plan. When I suggested that she come down here to have dinner with me, she said she'd hate to waste a meal for which they had already paid."

"What happened?" said Kamin.

"Oh, the hell with her! . . . Let's have dinner, the two of us."

He got up from the bench. He didn't wait until Kamin made up his mind. Louis was always making up other people's minds.

He took out a small, round pocket mirror and looked at himself. He seemed pleased with what he saw in the mirror—as though he found it hard to believe how good-looking he was. He had the elegantly subdued tan known as the Riviera tan, a lighter, more expensive shade than the Arlberg or St. Moritz tan. His face was handsome. His nose was straight. He had a high forehead and sensual lips. He smiled a great deal, and there were two lines running down the corners of his mouth, caused by his permanent smile. But his eyes seldom smiled. They were cold and had the color of gray marble—the kind that is used for expensive tombstones.

"Yes," he said, smiling. "We'll have dinner and then I'll take you to the Negresco. I want you to meet two terrific girls."

* * *

The lobby of the Negresco diffused the elegantly subdued atmosphere of a de luxe cemetery after business hours. A few old ladies seemed to be glued to their armchairs, immobile like mummies. From the walls came softly whispering voices and the phones rang with discreetly muted bells.

Kamin had had dinner with Louis. Afterward he had gone back to his room which was in the old Riquier district, a long way from the Negresco and its rich, decaying clientèle. His room had a stone floor and no heating system, which wasn't pleasant during the nights that were always cold. The only equipment was an iron bed, a chair with three legs and a mouse which he had christened Ferdinand. Ferdinand looked like a miniature cat. He would appear every night after midnight, sniff around for a while and leave.

There was always a smell of onion soup on the stairway and at the *épicerie* next door one could buy moldy Gorgonzola, an excellent *pâté maison* and white bread by the meter. The *marchand du vin* had a good *vin rosé*.

From the window of his room, Kamin could look into the

room across the street, where a pretty blonde girl displayed her excellent body every morning and evening while she got dressed and undressed. She was a generous soul, God bless her, and never bothered to put on a dressing gown when she stepped to the window to make up her face. She was a natural blonde; her name was Linette. Their conversation was strictly across the street, from-window-to-window. Some night, Linette promised, she would come over and take a look at Ferdinand. Some night when she felt like it, or got stood up by her boy friend. The boy friend was working for the Casino Municipal as an usher. In a mere thirty-two years he would be eligible for a pension from the city.

It was an easy, pleasant, irresponsible way of living, though Louis wouldn't have understood that. Louis' yardstick of contentment had always been money, success and career. He was the only child of a very successful lawyer and he was already following in his father's footsteps when Kamin had been taking post-graduate courses at the Sorbonne, playing music and writing a little.

"Writing what?" Louis had once asked.

"Books," Kamin had said.

Louis looked disappointed. "But there isn't any big money in them."

"No, there isn't."

That had been the end of the conversation. Louis never used books except some very thick volumes which he liked to put under his pillow. He liked to sleep hard and high.

* * *

"Come in," the girl said. "I am Britta Kent."

A soft, velvety English voice. Kamin was very sensitive to voices. Linette had a shrill voice, the kind of voice that tends toward nagging and making scenes, which was one reason that Kamin had never tried really hard to get her over to his room. But this girl's voice was lovely. Like the sound of a silver spoon clinking against a crystal cup half-filled with vintage champagne.

Then Kamin saw Louis. He was sprawled on the settee next to another girl.

"You're quite punctual," Britta said. She was frail and thin around her waist. Her hair came down in a rich golden wave on one side of her face. She had the peachy complexion that seems to be standard equipment of heroines in English novels. Hers was real.

"Kamin is always punctual," Louis was saying. "He was always among the first ones in school. He was our valedictorian."

The girls laughed as though he'd said something very funny. Kamin felt slightly embarrassed. He wished that he'd been expelled after a terrific scandal. Villains were more interesting than valedictorians.

Louis introduced him to the other girl. Her name was Carol. They were sisters, but they didn't look it. Carol was a real glamour girl; dark eyes under heavy lashes, a full, curved, sensual mouth, rich, dark hair. She was taller than Britta and wore a tight, teasing evening dress that suggested everything and showed nothing.

"Let me have a cigarette, Louis."

He opened his gold case.

"American cigarettes," Carol said, taking one. "Yesterday you had Egyptians. Don't you ever smoke French cigarettes?"

"I wouldn't even touch them."

Kamin smiled. Exotic cigarettes had been one of Louis' favorite clichés, and one that many people fell for. In the town in Central Europe where Louis and Kamin had grown up, French cigarettes had been an "imported" exotic specialty, and Louis always had them.

He never went for domestic brands. Anything went that had an *imported* label. It had seemed an innocent, adolescent snobbery, or perhaps a minor inferiority complex, but now Louis was a grown-up man.

Britta poured the drinks. There was a bottle of Scotch on the table.

"You must be terribly afraid," she said to Louis.

"Afraid?"

"Afraid of your own mediocrity. Of being just an extra . . .

The anonymous people whose names don't appear on the program."

It was a strange thing for a casual acquaintance to say. Kamin had had the same thought for years but he'd never been able to formulate it so exactly.

Louis tapped his cigarette hard against the back of his hand.

"Don't be silly, Britta. Can I help it if I like the good things in life?"

"The good things," she repeated mechanically, and shook her head. For a moment her eyes met Kamin's and there was a sudden understanding between them. Then, as if they were embarrassed by their nearness, each looked away from the other. Kamin glanced out of the window but he was still seeing her eyes. He wondered which one of the two girls Louis was after. A vague, frightening thought rose up in his mind. He hoped it wouldn't be Britta.

A blond young man came in from the bedroom of the suite. He was yawning and had the heels-to-toes walk of a punch-drunk fighter.

"Oh, hell," he said, letting himself fall into a chair. He was obviously quite drunk. No one spoke and he raised both hands, apologetically. He had an open face; he looked as though he'd never been worried in his life.

"Don't mind Jeff Baldwin," Britta said. "He's from Maryland. Do people in Maryland always go to a party and then pass out in the hostess' bedroom?"

"I'm getting lonesome for Maryland, darling," Jeff said, "And for Harvard and Washington Square, for the Plaza Bar and Uncle André's Daiquiris. That's why I am drinking."

"And at home you'll get lonesome for the flowers of Grasse, the songs of Paris and Veuve Clicquot 1924?"

He shrugged. "There's always somebody and something to get lonesome for, darling." He grabbed a glass and took a drink. "I am the loneliest person on earth," he said, with sincerity. He looked up and gave Kamin a shy, apologetic smile. Kamin liked him.

Louis got up, impatiently. He was irritated by Jeff's intrusion.

Evidently he hadn't known that Jeff was going to be here. He turned on the radio.

"Come," he said to Britta.

The radio blared "Hallelujah" and they danced, their bodies very close. When the dance was over, he kept her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, one after the other. Turning her hand over he pressed his mouth against the soft skin of her palm. His kiss was brutally suggestive. Britta shivered slightly and withdrew her hand.

So that's it, Kamin thought. Of course. Louis always picked the nice ones.

"Here's to us," Louis said to Britta, handing her her glass.

"I shouldn't," she said. "I've had enough."

"I want you to be happy. Let's dance."

She was in his arms again. "Why don't you ask Carol for a dance? You haven't danced with her tonight."

"I happen to be crazy about you. And I don't care about your sister."

"You're very rude."

"Or I'm very crazy about you." He kissed her ear.

"Don't do that." Suddenly she laughed.

"What's the matter?" He sounded irritated.

"You are a scream, Louis. Do you always look into the mirror when you kiss a girl?"

"Look, Britta. I've been running after you for ten days now . . ."

"I'm sorry. Really, you shouldn't have invested all that time in such an unlikely prospect. You might have got quicker results with one of those girls at the Jetée Casino." She moved away from him. "Please, let me go. No, *don't*."

He held her close. "When we danced last night, I thought you would be sensible."

"You thought *what*?"

"You were dancing that way. People were bumping into us. You kept sliding right back."

She pushed her knee hard into his kneecap. He exclaimed with pain and let her go. She straightened out her dress in front of the mirror and went out on the balcony.

Louis looked after her for a moment and let his hand glide through his hair. His hair was dark brown, slick and shining, brushed all the way back. He took out a little brush and carefully stroked his hair. Then he turned and looked toward the settee. Carol was still there in a half-sitting, half-lying position. She had her legs pulled up. Her thighs drew sharp lines under her tight dress. She had her head tilted back. Her lips were half open.

"What's the matter, Louis?" she said. "Don't you like the m-music?"

He filled her glass. He could see that she was more than a little drunk. He didn't like his women to be drunk. He used to say that a woman must go for a man because she knows who he is, not because she forgets who she is, but he wasn't so sure at the moment. He had not bothered to give Carol any attention because he had been taken up with Britta, and now he was surprised to discover that Carol was a very desirable woman. The dance with Britta might have something to do with it, and the drinks and the settee and Carol's dress. Above all, she was his for the asking, and Britta wasn't. He filled her glass again. She said something by way of perfunctory resistance but he took her into his arms and kissed her hard.

Jeff had quietly passed out in his chair. Kamin had gone out on the balcony to join Britta. Out of the radio came the rhythm of "Always." They were dancing. Cautiously he pushed his leg in between her thighs. He felt her close now. She didn't move away. He moved in closer. She was taller than Britta and her body fitted wonderfully to his. Just right, just right like that.

The music of "Always" broke off and was followed by a quickstep which was too fast for their rhythm, but by that time their own rhythm had become much stronger than the one that came from the radio, and the radio music was merely a sequence of disorganized noises, a background prop. Carol had become heavier in his arms. Her eyes were closed and from her parted lips came her hurried breath and the smell of whiskey. He didn't like it; but at least it was good whiskey.

Kamin and Britta were standing outside on the balcony,

their backs towards the room. Jeff was snoring peacefully in his chair. Louis was gratified by the definitely Boccaccio-ish aspect of the party. Boccaccio had always been involved with some girl, with her sister around—or was it Casanova? If Louis organized things properly, those two on the balcony wouldn't even know what was going on in the bedroom. He forced himself to get his mind off Britta and grasped Carol's shoulder, with both hands. He kissed her lips and she kissed his throat, with a wild, unexperienced abandon which would have stopped him if it hadn't been too late, but the gliding, sleek rhythm of their bodies, so close now that they were one, was too strong. He felt the contraction of her muscles, her stiffening, and then their rhythm was becoming faster and faster, sharp and conclusive. It was a good thing that the Negresco Hotel had old-fashioned door handles which you could open by pushing down your elbow. You were with her in the bedroom without even noticing it.

2

THERE WAS A TIME when Louis had been a major factor in Kamin's life. They had gone together for eight long years to the *Gymnasium*, a combined grade and junior high school, from eight in the morning to one in the afternoon. There were football games and fights, on Sundays you went hiking or swimming, and Saturday night parties with the boys interchanging each others' girls. And there were all-night discussions. They would discover Kafka, discern André Gide, discredit Sibelius. Berlioz was great and misunderstood, nobody could beat the Norwegian skiers in jumping but in slalom the Austrians were terrific, and people began to collect American jazz records.

There was always somebody to be discovered and discredited,

but most of the time they were talking of things they really didn't know anything about. It had been nice as long as it lasted, because you were a cog in the wheel. It wasn't exactly clear what kind of wheel it was, but it was important to be one of the cogs. It was only years later that Kamin began to realize that he had never really known Louis with whom he had spent so much time.

Kamin didn't remember exactly when the Dellinicks had come to the small town in Central Europe, where Kamin had grown up. When he met Louis in school, the Dellinicks had already been in town a few years. Every once in a while the solid citizens would remind one another, more or less subtly, that the Dellinicks "had not always lived there." Such reminders were usually voiced in connection with what was called "another Dellinick scandal." But then, what could you expect from people who had arrived in town from "the East," after the last war, in the wake of hunger, destruction, bankruptcy and revolution, a desperate, hard group of people?

There were three versions about the geographic origin of the Dellinicks. One was that Alfred Dellinick, Louis' father, had been a Socialist agitator in Poland who was forced to run away when Marshal Pilsudski became President of Poland. Version Two was that the Dellinicks had lived in Rumania where they had become rich on the sale of heroin and cocaine. According to Version Three, Alfred Dellinick, a rabid reactionary, had to give up his law firm and house in Hungary when Bela Kun had set up his Communist régime.

It was characteristic that there should be such widespread confusion about the family's past, and not less characteristic that the Dellinicks were able to keep up successfully the smoke screen around their life. Like many people in that part of the world, they spoke several languages. Of course they had papers, even some kind of passports, but papers and passports didn't mean much in those days when you could buy them for money. People who started to pry into the Dellinicks' past soon gave up.

"What can you expect of such people?" they would always say, with a shrug that combined contempt for the Dellinicks

with embarrassment for their own failure. "They are a typical product from the East."

The definition "East," geographically not quite correct, embraced a vague territory, including such provinces and countries as Lithuania, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Rumania, the Ukraine, Galicia, Russia. Things couldn't be very good in "the East," because no one coming from there ever wanted to go back. But then people from "Middle" Europe always wanted to go farther "West."

"The West" was delicate French perfumes, Swiss hotels with smooth service, the London *Times*, Bols liquor from Amsterdam and the strange, wonderful things called Frigidaires coming from that strange, wonderful land of jazz players, millionaires and platinum blondes across the ocean, America.

Whenever the conversation switched to the Dellinicks, people would automatically turn down their voices because the conversation was getting slightly risqué. The men would draw at their cigars with greater-than-average gusto, and the women would get that eager, shining look in their eyes. The Dellinicks were interesting people.

Nobody had ever seen Alfred Dellinick together with his wife. Madame Dellinick was an elegant woman. Some men went as far as to call her a lady. This immediately brought forth excited protests from their wives. A lady must be an open picture book and Madame Dellinick was an unsolved mystery. She had no friends. She never talked to anybody. She would go for a walk between two and three in the afternoon when everybody else was either busy, or resting. She fixed her hair alone; she bought her dresses out of town and she needed no masseuse because she had a very slim, almost youthful figure—so she deprived the local gossips of their chief sources of information.

When Madame Dellinick ventured out on the street, her face was always covered with a dark veil. Other women wore veils and gloves only in the evening but Madame Dellinick's face was invisible even on the hottest days of summer. The veil puzzled people. The opinion most often ventured was that Madame Dellinick was ashamed to show her face.

"She's crying out her eyes over that husband of hers," said some people.

"She drinks and has a red nose," said others.

Perhaps she even had an unmentionable disease, a dangerous rash. All this was idle gossip, as everybody could see at the theater. Madame Dellinick went to the theater twice a week. There she took off her veil and looked beautiful.

At the theater, however, there was another thing that puzzled the citizens no end. Madame Dellinick would always sit all alone in a second-floor box. She would remain in the rear of the box until the lights were dimmed. Then she would sit down in front. She never talked to the people in the neighboring boxes. Except for the old woman who ushered her into her box, no one had ever spoken to her at the theater.

Her husband would often be at the theater when she was there but he never was *with* her. He didn't patronize the arts so much as the artists; especially those who had shapely legs and softly overemphasized curves.

He was a tall, wiry man with an ugly, leathery face, gruff and unfriendly. He walked as though he'd swallowed a long stick of ice. His voice was harsh and his manners non-existent and he liked to demonstrate in public places that conventions, morals and ethics were here to be circumvented like the income tax laws.

He had his own table at the town's largest Café, at which no one else was supposed to sit, even during the crowded evening hours. Once or twice he had actually turned away from the table members of the city council and the millionaire owner of a local brewery firm. After such a scene, Dellinick liked to invite a waiter to sit down at his table and have a cup of coffee with him. The poor waiter would almost lose his job. Once Dellinick went to fetch the attendant of the ladies' room, a withered, drunken woman with the face of a disgusted owl. He made her sit at his table and ordered the most expensive Champagne, at four o'clock in the afternoon.

This caused quite a commotion throughout the place, and the headwaiter was forced to whisper into Alfred Dellinick's ear.

"So they don't like it, hah?" Alfred Dellinick shouted aggressively. When he got mad, which happened often, he looked exactly like a locally famous bass playing the death scene in *Boris Godounov*. "Tell them they can all go home or to hell if they don't like it here. Preferably to hell. My friend here"—he bowed to the watery-eyed old woman sitting there—"is going to celebrate her seventieth birthday *right here with me*."

Dellinick could well afford such clamorous whims of independence. He was the town's most successful lawyer. He had made his reputation as a criminal lawyer. In later years he switched to the more profitable loopholes of corporation law. The brewery, steel, textile and foundry moguls hated him but he was a formidable judiciary adversary to reckon with. He had a way with juries, pleading, gesticulating, crying, threatening, shouting, cajoling the bewildered men and women into unconditional surrender. He had the Lord under one cuff and the Devil under the other and he could shoot his cuffs faster than anybody else in court, including the District Attorney.

"A plea by Alfred Dellinick is a new form of legal narcosis," Mr. Justice Dietz once said. "I've never seen anything like it. The people seem chloroformed all over the courtroom."

Nobody would want to have such a man as adversary. The steel, brewery, textile and foundry moguls knew this better than anybody else. So they offered him more money and hired him as their own counsel.

Doctor Dellinick was frequently in trouble with the Lawyers' Chamber because of what was called his "unethical practices." He was accused of bribing witnesses, destroying and falsifying evidence, "hypnotizing" the foreman of a jury and fooling around with trust funds. In one single year he was cited three times before the Chamber. Once he was said to have sent presents to the wife of Mr. Justice Dietz, who subsequently decided an important case in favor of Dellinick's client. Then he tried to blackmail the husband of a woman client suing for divorce. He was also accused of making a "percentage deal" which was against the laws of the Chamber.

The investigations petered out into nothing. They couldn't

pin him down. Some people said he was being unfairly persecuted. Most people thought he was just too damn smart for them. He had a razor-sharp mind, knew the law and how to twist it around, and he could outplead and outyell anybody in court. After all, he was doing the same things that everybody else was trying to do, only he did them more successfully.

His legal mispractices were equaled only by his extra-marital escapades. He was always keeping the best-looking actress of the local theater, though there were many much younger, better-looking men. The younger, better-looking men would shrug angrily, saying that it was all a matter of money; probably Dellinick was "willing to pay more than anybody else thought she was worth."

But the women couldn't help having their own ideas about this. They knew, as only women would know, that there must be something else besides money. You can do it once with money, and twice, and six times, but you can't do it year in and year out just because you happen to be more generous.

Evidently, Alfred Dellinick was quite a man. The very same ladies, who pretended to be so shocked when his name was being mentioned at a party, couldn't help sighing wistfully, when they were alone, thinking of him.

3

THE DELLINICKS occupied the second floor of a modern apartment house in what was considered the strangest living arrangement in town. Madame Dellinick shared the larger half of the floor, six or seven rooms, with her son Louis and an old, sour woman by the name of Tonka, who did all the cooking and cleaning. Alfred Dellinick lived in the remaining three rooms. Each part of the apartment, his and hers, had a separate en-

trance from the stairway. "It works out fine," Dellinick would say. He didn't bother to keep this amoral arrangement a secret. That really killed the solid citizens.

Then there was the question of the maid. Dellinick hated Tonka, his wife's cook. He had his own maid who cleaned his rooms. "Cleaned his rooms, ha, ha," the citizens said. Everybody knew that Dellinick's maids were always good-looking peasant girls from out of town who came and went every month. Sometimes one would stay two months but never longer. Dellinick laughed, explaining to the lady in charge of the local employment agency, "You see, I'm old and ugly myself. I just can't stand old and ugly people around me. Get me a young one. Young and pretty, you know. I'll pay whatever they want."

The woman gasped inaudibly, and Dellinick said rudely: "And I'll pay you three times the usual commission. Now get busy, will you?"

Louis was the Dellinick's only child. He lived with his mother. If he was perturbed by the slightly unusual relationship between his father and mother, he had never given any indication to his classmates. There had been a time when he had been too young to understand. Later on, when he grew up and learned about those things, he didn't want to understand. He was invited to the houses of his classmates, whose parents lived more or less together, as most parents do. The boys sometimes talked about Louis and his parents. Once Kamin had asked him, "Would you rather live with your father?"

"If I want to see him, I can go to the office," Louis had answered, shrugging off the subject, in a definite way. Afterwards no one had asked any questions.

The truth was that Louis wouldn't have been able to answer the boys. There were never any fights or arguments in their house, like in other houses. His father and his mother simply ignored each other in what he had come to think of as a very civilized way of life. It had always been like that, and habits can become stronger than instincts. Evidently that was the way it was thought to be and there was nothing Louis could do about it. Perhaps he had a dim, half-conscious recollection of

long, empty nights when he hadn't been able to fall asleep because the loneliness had closed in on him like a wet, cold bed-sheet that mother put over you when you had the fever, and your teeth were chattering. Perhaps he had been lying there, his eyes wide open in the darkness, tears streaming down his cheeks. But if he had, he didn't want to think of it now. There were more important things now, football games, dances, dates with nice girls, school exercises. It was best to try not to remember.

His father would never eat at home. He had the eating habits of a night-club employee. He had a big cup of unsweetened black coffee in the morning and nothing at all during the day, while he was working with furious zeal. Late in the afternoon, he had a light snack at the Café and drank half a bottle of cognac. He ate his big meal between midnight and 2 A.M., in the company of his current protégée of the arts, in one of the town's cabarets, or bars.

When Louis met his father on the street, he would greet him with impersonal deference as if his father were one of his professors; when he met him on the stairway, he would run by, nodding hurriedly. His father rarely talked to him.

Sometimes Louis peeked into his father's apartment, in the morning, when his father had left and the peasant girl was cleaning up, leaving the door ajar. There was the smell of stale cigarette smoke in the curtains. Bottles and half-filled glasses were strewn all over the floor. Two unmade beds. The apartment was very different from the one Louis lived in with his mother, which was furnished with fake Biedermeyer pieces, always tidy and comfortable and dusted off. His father's apartment contained dark carpets, a tiger rug, large couches with silk pillows, book shelves and two mediocre copies of Rubens' nudes. The blinds were always drawn.

Once Louis came into the bedroom and saw the peasant girl and Tonka, the old cook, standing in a corner. They were both staring at what looked like a pair of black panties with black lace.

"Those women have no shame," Tonka was saying. "Leaving such things on the floor. God help those sinners."

She crossed herself. The peasant girl dutifully crossed herself too, and said; "Do you think she left without having on anything?"

They turned around and saw Louis. The peasant girl gasped and Tonka shouted at her, "Don't stand there! Go and do your work!" She shrugged angrily and said, "Oh, my Lord," and went out, again crossing herself.

Between his father's place and their own apartment there was a small room which, as though by mutual understanding, was used merely as a storeroom, like a layer of insulation between two walls. There was always the smell of camphor, coming from mother's fur coat, discarded clothes, mops, brooms, the carpet sweeper.

Every once in a while, when his mother told Louis to go and see his father—before the Christmas holidays, or on father's birthday—he would go to his father's office. There was the same forbidding atmosphere that surrounded his father's apartment. Dark, wood-paneled walls, red leather chairs, the cheap perfume of his father's two secretaries, a blonde and a redhead. One room had no furniture at all except a large couch with many embroidered pillows. The lights were discreetly dimmed. It did not bother Louis that there was perhaps something unusual in having a large couch in a law office. It didn't seem unusual either to come home from the movies and hear a woman laugh in his father's apartment. Louis had grown up with such experiences. He had come to regard them as perfectly commonplace.

When he saw his father, the older man would give him a slightly disapproving glance, saying, "I wish your mother wouldn't let you go around in short pants and a sailor's suit. Tell her to get you a man's suit with a vest and a necktie," or "Have you had any good fights lately with your classmates? And how good are you at football?"

He was unfavorably impressed when Louis said he didn't play soccer—but preferred tennis.

"Tennis is a sissy's game," his father said. "Here. Take the money and buy yourself a good football. It'll help you with the boys, too."

* * *

In the months that followed, his father casually inquired how Louis was doing on the football field. He never asked Louis how he was doing in school—school didn't interest him. But he seemed satisfied when Louis told him that the football team of his class had won the soccer championship of the local secondary schools, by beating the Technical College four to one, and that Louis had distinguished himself as center forward, scoring twice.

"Well, at long last *some* achievement," his father said. "Here. Take the money and take your entire team out."

"Where to?" asked Louis.

"Anyplace—for a beer, or coffee, a glass of cognac. I don't know. Ask them where they would like to go. Have fun, for God's sake. Life's too short and youth is even shorter."

Louis asked the boys where they wanted to go. Kamin, the goalkeeper, laughed and said he would like to go to his father's apartment.

"Why to my father's apartment?"

"Are you kidding? He keeps the best-looking woman in town there. Don't look as though you didn't know."

"But I don't. Who is she?"

"Marion Mara, the operetta diva. You should see her in the second act of Offenbachs *La Belle Hélène*. She has almost nothing on. I'd gladly trade in all those little flappers we go to dancing school with, for one evening with Marion."

Louis went to the next performance of *La Belle Hélène*. He didn't tell his mother, though he'd always told her where he was going. He didn't tell the boys either. He was afraid they might kid him. He bought standing room; no self-respecting student would ever buy a seat. Seats were for old people and girls. So were opera glasses.

But he regretted he didn't have an opera glass when Marion Mara came on the stage. Louis sensed the electrifying effect she had on the audience. There was an awed whisper when she stepped up to the footlights and the spotlight danced over her tight gown of black satin which had a long slit on one side.

When she thrust her leg out, the white skin showed just above her black stocking. Her voice was shrill and nobody in his clear mind could have pretended that she was an actress but how many people could watch her in their clear minds?

Louis' throat had suddenly, strangely become dry. He wasn't able to swallow. His hands were wet. He was sure his face and his ears were burning. He glanced furtively around to see whether they were watching him. It was like being naked and everybody staring at you.

After a while he relaxed. Nobody seemed to notice him. The people's heads were strained. They were all trying to get a good look at the woman up on the stage. She moved around like a lazy tiger cat. She had a way of playing tricks with her body by making the entire male audience partners in her play. It was so exciting that Louis found himself clenching his fists, until he felt his sharp nails in his palms.

That night, when he came home from the theater, he stopped for a moment in front of the door of his father's apartment. "He keeps her in there," Kamin had said.

Louis listened. Everything was quiet. No one seemed at home. Louis opened the door to the apartment where he lived with his mother and went to bed. He listened to the sounds on the stairway, people coming home, talking, walking up, but no one came to his father's apartment. He was up until two in the morning and finally fell asleep.

The following evening he saw his mother all dressed to go out. She had on her thin, dark veil, and carried her silver bag, which meant that she was going to the theater. He asked her whether he could go with her.

"But, of course, dear." She hesitated. "I thought you had your dancing-school lesson with the other boys and girls."

Louis said he didn't want to go to the dancing school tonight. His mother gave him a quick, surprised look but she didn't say anything. She rarely did. She was always there but never seemed to do or say anything. She smiled seldom and she never laughed, but Louis was used to that, too.

He was glad that his mother remained seated in the back of the box and went to the railing only after the lights were

dimmed. He didn't want to be seen sitting next to his mother. The boys would laugh at him. He had a vaguely uncomfortable feeling at the thought of living in the place of his mother. He was a young man now; he belonged in the other apartment, where his father lived among the paintings of the Rubens nudes.

The curtain went up. Louis saw the unfamiliar scenery, a dark room, a man sitting at a table. Then the man began to recite Doctor Faust's monologue which Louis had learned in school. Goethe's *Faust*, Part One. How stupid of him! In his crazy passion for that woman he hadn't even bothered to check up on the program. Of course, Marion's name wasn't there. What would she be doing in *Faust*?

In the dimness he stared at the small-print announcements at the bottom of the program. Marion Mara would appear again Saturday night in *The Bayadère*, Operetta by Leon Fall.

Saturday was three days away. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. If you didn't count today and Saturday, it was only two days away. He wished he could walk out. But he was afraid his mother might ask him questions. He didn't care for *Faust* and he didn't like the actress who played Margarete. She was so—cold. Compared to Marion Mara, she was a wooden puppet.

It was in the middle of the first act, when he noticed a slight stir among the audience. A man and a woman came in. They made a lot of noise getting to their seats in the third row not far from the box where Louis and his mother were sitting. A woman in the box behind theirs said, "There's Alfred Dellinick with his latest outrage. Can't they ever come in time?"

Louis didn't see Marion's face, but he couldn't take his eyes off her bare shoulders and the sharp lines of her breasts under her very low-cut dress. Once, while the actress playing Margarete was reciting a long monologue, Marion whispered into Alfred Dellinick's ear, and both laughed loudly. Some people hissed. Everybody turned to look at them. Everybody but his mother, Louis noticed.

When the curtain fell and the lights went on, his mother got up and moved back into the rear of the box but he kept

sitting in front. Then his father looked up. He seemed surprised to see him there and said something to the woman. She turned her head and looked up at him. Louis felt that he was blushing. When he blushed, his ears would always begin to burn. He hoped they couldn't see his ears from away down there. He tried to smile and nod in a debonair way, raising his eyebrows slightly, as sophisticated actors would nod on the stage.

Marion Mara said something to his father. Now they were both looking at him, smiling. He pretended not to see them and waited a minute until he hoped his face would look normal. Then he went back to where his mother was sitting.

She didn't say anything and he didn't talk about father or Marion Mara or anybody else. During the second act, he kept looking out of the corner of his eyes at the woman down there, holding his head straight, so that his mother wouldn't notice it. He stared until the muscles of his neck hurt him. The woman looked up at him twice—not directly, turning her head only half toward him, but Louis knew that she was glancing at him. His heart beat faster. He wondered why she was looking at him.

Later, when the actress playing Margarete was alone on the stage, singing the ballad of the King of Thule, he heard Marion Mara laugh. She was saying something to his father and then Dellinick laughed, too. People turned around and the woman in the box behind Louis was saying—"What a scandal! I wish they'd throw them out!"

In the middle of the last act Marion Mara got up, pushed back her seat with an audible snap that sounded like a pistol shot in the dark house and walked through the row, bumping into the knees of the outraged people. Alfred Dellinick shoved the program into his pocket and followed her. Again everybody turned after them. The actress on the stage seemed to have seen it too, because there was a slight pause—then she continued her lines in a stiff, unnaturally low voice.

His mother didn't say anything while they walked home. She seemed more taciturn than ever. Louis didn't feel like talking. He opened the door to the house and switched on the light,

and walked up behind his mother. As he passed the door to his father's place, he held his breath for a moment, trying to catch a sound, but all was quiet.

He said good-bye to his mother. She gave him her good-night kiss in the air, without touching his forehead. He went into his room and lay down on his bed in his clothes.

He couldn't sleep. He kept lying there, staring at the ceiling. At one o'clock he heard steps on the stairway. He cautiously opened the door of his room that went out into the hall, and listened. He heard his father's voice as he opened the door to his apartment, and then a woman's voice—Marion's. Louis would have recognized her voice among millions. They were laughing. The door was shut and the voices fell away.

He went back to his room, but he couldn't bear to stay in there. He went into the hall, and tiptoed through the dining room and opened the door to the small room between both apartments, that smelled of camphor. He saw a light shining under the door to his father's studio.

Their voices sounded quite clear now. A gramophone was playing "Ramona." There was the clinking of a glass, and Marion's laughter.

Louis' hands were cold and wet. He wanted to get out and back to his room. He bumped into something. A mop fell down and the stick hit the floor with a sound like a shot.

The door was being opened and his father was standing in the frame. He didn't have his coat on. His necktie was pushed aside and Louis saw a glass in his hand.

"What the hell is going on in here?"

"It's me, father. I was looking . . . looking for something."

From the other room came Marion's voice. "What's the matter, Alfred?"

His father turned over his shoulder. "Shut up, Marion. It's the boy. He hit a mop."

He heard the muffled sound of silk and clothes. Then her head showed up behind his father. Her hair was falling down her shoulders, streams of burning, liquid gold.

"Don't let him stand there in the dark. Come in, Louis."

He wondered how she happened to know his name.

His father took his arm and shoved him into the room. Louis stood there blinking, and then he blushed all over again.

Marion Mara was standing at the foot of the large couch. She was in her slip. A transparent black thing that gave away every line of her body. She wore black stockings and shoes with silly high heels. Louis turned his head and saw her dress thrown carelessly over a chair. The upper part of her slip was made of transparent lace.

"You could have put on your house gown," his father's voice was saying, in a note of slight reproach.

"Oh, nonsense. It's not the first time that he's seen a woman like that. Or is it?"

She seemed to enjoy his embarrassment.

"Don't stand there like that, Louis. Here, take a swallow of my drink."

Next thing, he felt the drink in his dry mouth, found himself sitting on the couch next to her. Marion was propped up on her elbow. One shoulder strap of her black slip had slid down. Louis looked away.

His father brought him a glass. "I guess it's about time that you got your own glass," he said. He laughed. Marion was laughing, too. Louis wondered what seemed so funny to them. There was a new expression in his father's eyes—as though Louis had brought home from school a favorable report card. His father seemed to stare at him with newly awakened interest, almost with pride.

They drank. Louis' head was beginning to swim.

"Patience is the most important thing in life," his father's voice was saying. It seemed to come from far away. "If you are patient, all things will come true. I always hoped the day would come when I'd see my son grow up."

"Don't you like your drink?" she said. She was lying on the couch, close beside him. She was on her stomach, looking up at him. He could see the breasts under the slip and——

He nodded, forcing himself to look straight into her face.

"Well, drink up. It's champagne."

The bubbles tickled his throat. So that was what champagne

tasted like. In the half-light he saw his father, the long face, the sagging shoulders. His father opened another bottle.

"You aren't afraid of me, Louis, are you?"

He shook his head. He felt her lips on his throat and then he seemed to be floating through space—rising and falling, and floating.

"I didn't know you went in for *that* combination," his father was saying, dryly.

"I do," she answered, out of her throat, her tongue playing around Louis' lips. "Yes, I do." She was doing a thousand things to his skin, his hair, his ears, while she kept talking to his father. "It would be a new kind of première, even for me."

He wished he knew what they were talking about. He felt he ought to say something at this point.

"I thought you were—swell in *La Belle Hélène*."

"A connoisseur," she cried, laughing. "That's wonderful. Louis is a lover of the arts. I can give a much better performance, Louis. Ask him. Ask your father." She jerked up one shoulder.

"You damn well can," his father was saying. He drank and laughed again.

"Let's not talk about that flea circus. You know how I hate it."

Louis couldn't get that. "You—you don't like the theater?" He was shocked.

By way of an answer, she said an obscene word.

"The trouble with you, Marion, is that you have no sense of achievement," his father was saying. "You don't give a damn about your reputation as an actress, or anything, except money and the clothes you wear. And even your clothes are only a way to display what's underneath them. Look at that girl that played tonight in—what was the name of the play? That slim one. I bet you she'll stay up all night to read the reviews. She *does* give a damn. She's an artist."

Marion sat up with a jerk. The second shoulder strap was coming down. "Why don't you go to that little beanstalk with her duck feet if you're so crazy about her? Just mention her name once more, and I'm going to leave."

She rolled around and came very close to Louis. "*You* won't talk about her, will you, Louis?" she said. Her lips were half opened. There was a glassy look in her eyes.

"Turn the light down!" she cried to his father over her shoulder. Her head came down, and he felt her very close. From somewhere, far away, came the voice of his father and his barking laughter and then everything became hazy and terrifyingly wonderful.

And that was Louis Dellinick's initiation into the great mystery of love, under the benevolent auspices of his father.

4

MARION MARA made a great' entrance the night she came to the town's largest coffee house, escorted by both the older and the younger Dellinick. She was a very bad actress but entrances were her specialty. She had on a leopard coat that happened to slip down just as she was walking through the large, crowded Café, displaying her bare, exciting shoulders.

She turned toward Louis, who walked behind her, and gave him her throaty laugh. She was talking to him, seizing his arm just under his armpit with her long, carmine-tipped fingers. In the brightly lit, over-crowded room, the gesture was revealing and intimate. For a moment there was a hushed silence all over the place. Everything had become terribly obvious. The solid citizens were gasping.

The older man was sitting down, cocky and contemptuous of the crowd. Louis' face was glowing. He deeply enjoyed his new prominence. He helped Marion out of her coat. He kissed her hands and for a few moments his lips brushed over her wrist and then he kissed her palms, while the older man looked on, eminently pleased. A shudder ran through the Café.

Alfred Dellinick ordered a bottle of Scotch whiskey, which

was a sensational extravagance. Louis downed his glass, and another one. His face seemed changed. He no longer looked like the boy who had enjoyed such innocent pleasures as dates with nice girls, dancing school, or football matches. A new, more exciting era had begun in his life.

For a while, Marion Mara was seen all over town with the two Dellinicks, father and son. The solid citizens were shocked at the unusual triangle and their scandalous ways. They carried on in dance halls, night clubs, and once they were seen and heard in a box at the local movie house. . . . The day after the theater season had closed and Marion Mara was gone, the two Dellinicks showed up with a redheaded dance girl whom they had picked up at the Savoy Bar. There was a minor complication when Marion Mara came back to town for a short visit and found her place already occupied, but Alfred Dellinick solved the problem, with characteristic determination, by slapping Marion's face in front of the solid citizens, in the middle of the Café. It had been quite a sight. Kamin was there that night and he remembered the scene well. Marion had begun to yell—such language!—and three waiters had to almost carry her out. She left the following day and didn't come back.

Afterwards, there'd been another actress, another dancer, another incidental pickup, sometimes one girl and sometimes two or three. The solid citizens couldn't quite make up their minds which one was worse; Senior and Junior with the same girl—or in one *chambre séparée* with two girls. They had ceased to be father and son. They were called "The Two Dellinicks," as though they were a well-publicized circus act. They were becoming a local legend.

Actresses were the fashion in these days. Then it was nightclub singers and dancers. Sometimes it was merely "import"—dark-haired, luscious women from Hungary, Rumanian red-heads walking in clouds of perfume, plump, professionally charming Viennese girls, over-dressed Polish "artists," slim long-stemmed girls from Sweden, a delicate little French girl who stood on her head on the table in the *chambre séparée*.

Nobody saw Mrs. Dellinick any more; she seemed to have faded completely from the scene. When people asked Louis

where his mother was, he shrugged slightly and said she'd gone to Switzerland for a few months.

Some people speculated on what she must have gone through when her son moved to his father's apartment and didn't even come home to have his meals with her. Kamin remembered seeing her for the last time two days after Louis had made his first appearance with Marion and his father at the Café. Madame Dellinick wore an even heavier veil than before. She seemed to walk close to the walls of the houses as though she didn't want to face the passers-by. She seemed smaller. Or perhaps her shoulders had sagged a little.

Some people tried to keep up with the escapades of the Dellinicks, father and son, which was getting increasingly difficult. They changed their companions faster than the program changed at the Savoy Bar, twice a month. Alfred Dellinick looked thinner, happier, younger. His faculty for getting along without sleep had always astonished people who worked with him. At the age of fifty-five, he could stay up all night with girls, drink heavily, go to bed at five o'clock in the morning for two, three hours. At eight-thirty, he would be in his office, shaved, massaged, his thinning hair wet and brushed back, a speck of lather behind his ear, looking fit and fresh.

Louis had inherited from his father the ability to get along without much sleep. Other people who went to a dress ball, or spent a wild night with liquor and women, would have a terrible hangover the next morning. Louis always looked pinkish and well slept, as though he'd had ten hours of sleep.

* * *

Louis' amazing ability to get along with almost no sleep had always intrigued Kamin. From where he was sitting in the classroom, Kamin could watch Louis, whose seat was across the narrow aisle. Kamin could always tell whether Louis had stayed up all night. In that case, Louis would come to school in a dark-blue suit, having on still the patent-leather shoes which he had been wearing with his tuxedo. He had arrived at home just in time to change for school and hadn't bothered to change his shoes.

He seemed a glamorous, exciting person to Kamin who had gone to bed the evening before at ten o'clock. There was still the faint fragrance of an exotic perfume around Louis' neck, a woman's perfume.

"I've been trying to scrub it off but that damned smell sticks and sticks," Louis would say with mock displeasure. He was really proud of the perfume and the way he'd acquired it.

Sometimes Kamin would glance at Louis, who was dozing through the hour of Greek literature, his head bent down on his chest. The fictitious adventures of Odysseus had once seemed exciting but now they were dull and colorless indeed compared to the more exciting, real-life adventures of Louis. Only a few hours ago a woman had clasped her arms around his neck, whispering into his ears, cramming her body against his!

Kamin's experiences had been limited to the girls he had grown up with in town. They were pretty girls, pretty in an adolescent way: they didn't mind being kissed and made love to as long as no one was looking; but they were hardly a match for Louis' *femmes fatales*, those exciting actresses, dancers and mistresses-at-large who seemed overwhelming in their passionate generosity and exhausting in their demands.

Louis' classmates pooh-poohed his amorous successes. A few of the boys were would-be-Lotharios themselves and one, Michael, was said to be going to a whorehouse, on the other side of the railroad tracks, twice a week, without ever having to pay because the girls liked him so much. Michael, a tall, husky fellow who had won fame as the class's best football-player, said that Louis' alleged successes with the ladies were so much bunk.

Louis didn't argue with them. He listened politely and smiled, somewhat disdainfully, it seemed to Kamin. One day, after a heated discussion about the boys' individual pursuits had been broken up only by the arrival of the chemistry professor, Louis whispered to Kamin, "I'll show you something during recess."

At recess, when the classroom was empty, Louis came over to Kamin's bench. He unbuttoned his collar and bent down. "Here," he said. "Look."

Kamin stood up and saw three reddish spots at the base of Louis' neck. "What's that—you got a rash?"

Louis laughed good-naturedly as if he hadn't expected Kamin to understand. "That's the *accolade* which a temperamental redhead gave me tonight." He buttoned up his collar and adjusted his tie. "I must tell her to calm down. Next time she'll bite me in the face and that will look rather embarrassing." A few boys had come into the classroom and Louis had whispered, "This is a secret between you and me, understand?"

Kamin had had just time to nod. He was shocked at the discovery and overjoyed that Louis had picked him of all the other boys as his intimate confidant. Many boys disliked Louis because they had tried to get his confidence and had been turned down by him.

For some time thereafter Kamin had been under the magic spell of Louis' adventures. He would go to Louis' apartment and Louis would show him his ties and shoes and suits. He had more ties than Kamin remembered having seen anywhere except in the show window of the town's finest haberdashery shop.

"They just send me all the new models and I keep the ones I like," he said.

"Aren't they expensive?"

Louis shrugged. "My father takes the money away from the people and I am trying to put it back into circulation. That's what money is here for."

Kamin nodded in awe. Louis always said the god-damndest things. Kamin sighed a little. He owned only four or five neckties, none of them comparable to any of those.

Louis shrugged again. "I wish I could give you one. But my father doesn't want me to give them away. A matter of principle, you know. You start giving away your ties and pretty soon you wind up giving away your bank books."

"Certainly," Kamin said. He couldn't help feeling disappointed though.

A week later Kamin came to Louis' apartment. They had decided to work out their algebra equations together. When Kamin rang the bell, Louis stuck out his head. He was in his shirt

sleeves and looked uncombed. From inside came the laughter of girls, the sound of clinking glasses.

"Sorry, Kamin," Louis said, "but we'll have to skip it. I have two visitors."

"Two?" Kamin said. "You alone with them?"

"Sure," Louis said. He stuck out his chin and smiled.

"Two and one make three. That's a damn good equation, much better than the ones we were trying to work on."

"Yes," said Kamin. He could have killed himself for standing there like a fool, grinning stupidly, waiting for Louis to ask him in. If Louis really had two women in there, why didn't he ask Kamin in and make it a foursome? But Louis didn't say anything and after a few uncomfortable seconds that seemed as many years Kamin said, "Well, I guess I'd better be on my way." He hesitated, hoping against hope that Louis was going to change his mind; but Louis cheerily waved his hand in front of his eyes.

"Sorry, old man. Be seeing you tomorrow."

The next day in school, Kamin expected Louis to have some explanation but Louis was sitting there with his head down on his chest, dozing as usual. When Louis talked to him, two days later, he didn't even mention the incident. Afterwards, things weren't the same any more. They saw little of each other and if there had been anything like friendship between them, it petered out into indifference.

After he met Marion Mara, Louis never went to his dancing lessons any more. The dancing lessons were an innocent merriment. Nobody really bothered about learning to dance but the lessons were a good pretext for the boys to get a perfunctory knowledge of the girls' anatomy. The girls liked to be escorted through the dark streets leading to the dancing school, especially when it rained and there was only one umbrella for two people, and the boys had to hold them very close.

At that time, Louis' girl had been Trudy Matous. She was frail and anemic-looking, with big, black eyes, shiny black hair and an alabaster-white face. Her father was a client of Alfred Dellinick's law firm. Matous was the locally most prominent capitalist and the general manager of the Steel Works.

One day Louis would take over his father's business, and Trudy would inherit her father's money. It was a perfect setup and everybody assumed that Louis was going to marry Trudy. There was a lot of kidding and Trudy would blush. She was deeply in love with Louis, in a poetic, adolescent way. She wasn't ashamed to admit it. She even refused to be sent to a smart finishing school in Switzerland. Everybody knew that she didn't want to leave on account of Louis. The other girls said she was foolish. Only very rich girls from England and America went to that finishing school, and it was quite a distinction to go there.

Louis had always been nice to her, in a detached, impersonal way. He took her to the confectioner's shop where the gang would meet in the late afternoon. He would sit there, buy her a Parisian Cream cake, and smile at her. He seldom kissed her and he never held hands with her.

"You're a fool," the other girls said to Trudy. "Don't you see that he doesn't even give you a look?"

"No man would while he eats such wonderful pastry," Trudy said, sounding very wise and grown up. "You girls had better learn this in time. It will save you a lot of heartbreak."

"He's an egotist. He looks all over the pastry and fishes out the largest pieces for himself."

"What of it? There's enough for everybody."

The pastry was wonderful. They had Ischlars, and large "Indians," big chocolate puffs filled with whipped cream; *mille feuilles* that fell apart into a thousand leaves, and Linzer pieces, that melted on your tongue. They were as much of a temptation to the town's heavyweight matrons as the brothel across the tracks was to their husbands.

* * *

Louis walked out on Trudy, when Marion Mara came into his life. Just walked out on her without giving her so much as a second glance. Didn't come to the dancing school, never showed up at the pastry shop. Trudy stopped going there. She couldn't face the other girls.

"We told you so," they would say.

Trudy looked thin and ill in these days; the girls said she was crying her heart out. One day she was gone without good-byes. She had left for Switzerland.

Louis didn't seem to care. He even lost his interest in playing soccer. He didn't show up for daily training. The team held a special meeting under the leadership of Kamin, the team captain, and it was reluctantly but unanimously decided to scratch him. He was a good goalkeeper and, more important, he owned the team's only football. Louis saved Kamin and the other boys more embarrassment by generously donating the football to the team.

Afterwards the boys saw little of Louis outside of school. Once Kamin invited him to a movie—a new American movie with Tom Mix, which was the talk of the town—but Louis thanked him, with a faintly condescending smile, as though the very notion amused him.

“What's wrong with Tom Mix?” Kamin said, angrily.

“Oh, nothing. I'm too busy, that's all.” Louis smiled again, as though he couldn't possibly explain *how* busy he was. He didn't care for the pleasure of adolescence. He was a grown-up man. Hard drinks, hard women, hard fun.

* * *

His appearance underwent a radical change. Most of the boys were buying their shirts and neckties at one of the town's better stores. Louis began to buy his clothes and haberdashery—he didn't say “shirts” any more—in “the West.” He was the only person in town who owned a midnight-blue double-breasted tuxedo. It was a slick number that he'd brought back from a trip with his father to Rome, and it made him look ten years older.

One day he came to school wearing a necktie with a futuristic design. “Father brought it back from Paris,” Louis said to Kamin. He fingered his tie. “Nice, isn't it?”

Kamin admitted that it was nice. It didn't seem very important. Somehow, there were so many other things on earth that seemed far more important than neckties.

“Father stays at the Ritz,” said Louis. “He had the room next

to the suite of Prince LeMonnier. One of the Rockefellers was there, too." He slapped his hand lightly against Kamin's chest. "How's that, old man?"

Kamin sat back on his bench. He put his feet up on the table and gave Louis a going over.

"It's too bad," he said.

"What's too bad?"

"That you had to turn into a snob, Louis. The boys won't agree with me but I still maintain that you would have been one hell of a nice guy if you hadn't had too much money."

"You should know by now that I don't give a damn about the boys or the girls or anybody in this stupid, provincial hole," said Louis, but his annoyed voice betrayed his words. "Maybe you don't know that the boys don't feel so hot about you either! They think you are a stuffed shirt, if you ask me."

Kamin nodded. He had never been popular with his classmates, because he found it difficult to make friends. He was shy and afraid of being snubbed and they thought his defensive shyness was arrogance. He tried to understand other people and he had an innate humility but at his age humility was considered a liability. The boys resented being understood; they preferred people who agreed with them or disagreed violently; then the argument was settled with loud words and fists. Kamin had at various occasions defended Louis as a victim of circumstances, but the boys shrugged and sneered at Kamin and walked away from him.

Kamin's mother had died when he was very young. He had almost no recollection of her, except her laughter. She had loved to laugh and be happy. His father had been killed in the First World War. He had been a high-ranking officer and a well-known doctor, and his death had come as a shock to many people. "Things must really be bad when a regimental doctor is being killed by shrapnel," they had said. The truth was that his father had gone too far up front, crusading against the criminal practice of unnecessary amputations of limbs. He had saved quite a few wounded men from losing their legs and hands but he had paid for it with his own life.

He had been a tall, earnest, soft-spoken man with thought-

ful features and prematurely gray hair. Kamin had been only seven years old when his father went away, and it was only years later that he began to realize that his father had been the town's outstanding diagnostician. His untimely death had created a legend among his former patients who stated emphatically that his acute observation, vast medical knowledge and a sense of occasional intuition had enabled him to determine a patient's malady "at a glance." When Kamin went through the streets, people he'd never met in his life would tell him what a pity it was that his father wasn't here any more. And there was a strong opinion among the citizens that the town's health situation had deteriorated rapidly since the death of his father.

Kamin had been living with Uncle Jaques, a brother of his father, an angular, sharp-tongued man who was known around town as something of an eccentric. He carried a little notebook in his vest pocket into which he would scribble all the anecdotes and jokes he could gather. Being a methodical man, he would classify them A, B or C. "A" tales could be told in anybody's company, "B" stories were fit for ladies if they happened to be Grade "B" ladies. "C" material was reserved exclusively for stag parties in advanced alcoholic decay.

Uncle Jaques had a sixth sense and an uncanny timing for business opportunities. He knew exactly when to start a new business and when to walk out of it. He successfully launched a wheel factory, a new-fangled burglary alarm system, a cheese production and a small symphony orchestra. He was interested only in the planning and nursing of an enterprise; as soon as it seemed to have outgrown the childhood diseases, he would walk out and leave the routine work to others, after making sure of a share in the profits. This had made him independent of the intricate, social and financial booby traps in town.

"I don't have to be nice to the matrons. I don't want their husbands' business," he used to say to Kamin. "Beware of those women, especially the emotionally unstable ones between forty and fifty years of age. They love you one day and hate you the next. It's very trying."

5

AFTER Louis' graduation from law school, he went to work in his father's new law firm as an apprentice. As a rule, the job of lawyer's apprentice was a combination of office boy and pencil sharpener but Louis didn't busy himself with the lowly errands of the legal profession. His rapid, somewhat breath-taking rise at the bar was the antithesis of a Horatio Alger story, proving that the best way to start in business is at the top, preferably as the son of the boss.

The town's most expensive interior decorator devised a special horseshoe-shaped desk for Louis which contained a small bar and a phonograph, among other things. There was an outer office, used by two secretaries whose skill at crossing their legs surpassed their efficiency in shorthand; two doors led into the two offices of Dellinick, father and son.

In between their offices was the "conference room" which contained neither chairs nor tables commonly associated with conference rooms, but only book shelves, a large couch half concealed by a curtain which displayed a nightmarish, expressionistic dagger design, and a few paintings.

The "conference room" at the Dellinick office was the talk of the town. While male clients were always taken into the office of either Dellinick Senior or Junior, it was rumored that some lady clients with "very personal cases" were sometimes ushered straight into the "conference room."

After three years' work as a *konzipient* (lawyer's apprentice) Louis passed the bar examination and became a full-fledged partner of the firm. Rumors of the exam being fixed were soon discounted by Louis' masterful exploits in the loopholes of law. Like his father, he could twist a case until his opponents and the court were completely befuddled. Soon he was in trouble

with the Lawyers' Chamber for "unethical practices." It looked as if he were going to continue in his father's footsteps, and the brewery, steel and foundry tycoons were delighted.

Then something unforeseen happened. One day Matous, the general manager of the Steel Works, called up Alfred Dellinick.

"Say, Alfred, about that Pertz case——"

"I'm sorry, Matous. But I told you from the very beginning that we didn't have a leg to stand on. Anyway, we got him down to a quarter of what he wanted in the first place."

"Oh, that's all right. What really bothered me about this case was the way it was handled." The general manager hesitated. He was a tough man toward his yes-men but Dellinick could be a very unpleasant no-man. "I don't know how to explain this. . . ."

"How to explain *what*?"

"I've heard a few stories about your son, Alfred. He's been seen at those meetings. You know what I mean." Matous would rather mention syphilis than *that* word.

"What's wrong with Louis' attending some labor meetings? I think he ought to know about labor relations."

"Why doesn't Louis attend the meetings of the Catholic trade unions? Well, even the Social-Democrats—though I could think of a better place for a young fellow. But Louis has no business to go to the Communists." Matous took a deep breath. Now it was said. The dreadful word.

"Don't be a fool, Matous. This isn't 1890."

The handle of Matous' phone was trembling. "I was once young myself, Alfred. Almost went to jail because I mimicked the Kaiser at a fancy-dress ball. But there are certain basic rules we live by, Dellinick. Your son, the son of a corporation lawyer, shouldn't attend Communist meetings. They even mentioned his name in their paper."

"Louis is old enough to run his own life. I don't give a damn for your rules and conventions, Matous. Why don't you grow up? Ever occurred to you that some day your furnaces may go out?"

"What?" Matous was gasping.

"I'm going to take Louis off all your cases. In return, I suggest that you take my son's private life off your mind. That fair enough? Good day."

The general manager hung up the phone, wondering dully whether he'd made a fool of himself. He came, reluctantly, to an affirmative conclusion. You simply couldn't argue with Alfred Dellinick. He would slip away from you like quicksilver, turn around, hit you when you didn't look.

Matous had received a letter from his daughter's teachers in Switzerland. They were worried about Trudy. Evidently, she was still in love with Louis Dellinick. Matous didn't like Louis' running around with Marion Mara and all those actresses, but that was, after all, Louis' private business. But suppose the general manager should have a son-in-law who was affiliated with the Communists? Matous sighed. The directors of the board of the Steel Works wouldn't like that at all. Matous had enough trouble to support Alfred Dellinick the way things were. Several members of the board were close to the Catholic party. They were enraged at what they called "that reckless atheist lawyer." If he hadn't been such a *good* reckless atheist lawyer, they would have insisted on severing relations with him immediately.

* * *

The crisis arrived much sooner than Matous had anticipated. A few days later the head of the Steel Works' legal department called up the general manager in great excitement. A worker, J. Karas, had filed suit against the Steel Works.

Karas had lost both feet in a bad accident. He had worked at the lower end of the furnace, where he and a few other men had been sprinkling water on the stream of molten steel that came out of the furnace. Suddenly there had been a crash and then the flaming mass was rushing down upon him. . . .

There was an investigation. It was proved that the government's safety regulations had been flagrantly neglected by the management. The company had offered Karas a lump sum to settle his claims out of court. For a while it looked as if the invalid worker would accept; then his attitude had stiffened.

Now Matous understood why. Karas was represented by no other than Louis Dellinick!

Alfred Dellinick listened to Matous' wrath with amused patience. "I told you that my son wouldn't handle your business any longer, didn't I?"

Matous exploded. "You have represented us for the past eleven years. Now your own son is suing us. We're going to be the laughing stock of the town!"

"You never asked me to represent you against Karas."

"You are not our sole legal representative, Dellinick. We have to distribute our business evenly. Hessler has been handling this matter for months and he's going to see it through."

"He's going to lose it, too."

Matous came up with his trump card. "Don't tell me you didn't know that Karas was a Communist?"

"Does that restore his feet? The Judge will not ask the plaintiff for his political beliefs."

"You wouldn't have talked that way if this were your case."

"Why speculate on how I would have talked, my *dear* Matous? It so happens that Hessler is handling this case. And it so happens that three years ago I proposed to the board of directors to handle your entire law business on an exclusive basis. You turned the offer down."

"And we'll turn it down again and again!" Matous shouted. "I refuse to be blackmailed!"

Dellinick cast an amused glance at his son who was listening in on the other extension. Louis glanced back, smiling.

"I wouldn't use such harsh words," Dellinick said. "It's not polite, Matous." He hung up.

On the day the case came up before court, the small courtroom was overcrowded. They had to move the trial to the auditorium which was reserved for criminal trials before a jury. The listeners were mostly fellow lawyers, who were attracted by the Machiavellian aspect of the case. It was generally expected that the invalid workman would be made the victim of an unscrupulous deal between the Steel Works and the Dellinicks.

The Lawyers' Chamber had sent three observers to the trial. This time they were going to catch the Dellinicks.

But Louis Dellinick handled the case of his client with skill and efficiency, even though it was generally noted that he hadn't inherited his father's razor-sharp, brilliant ruthlessness.

"He's made of wood. The old man is pure granite," somebody said.

Alfred Dellinick sat in the spectators' front row, beaming with pride when his son pleaded his case, hitting hard at Hessler and the Steel Works.

The verdict brought no surprise. The plaintiff was awarded judgment in the full amount of the suit. The Steel Works were ordered to pay the costs of the trial, including the fees of both lawyers.

Alfred Dellinick and his son left the courtroom together. Two attendants rolled out the chair in which the invalid worker was sitting. In front of the courthouse, a photographer from the local Communist paper was asking them to pose for a picture but before he could snap the shutter, the older Dellinick had moved aside.

"Just take Mr. Karas and my son," he said. "I am only a spectator anyway."

The picture appeared on the front page of the paper, with the caption, "Son of Capitalist Lawyer Wins Comrade Karas' Case Against His Father's Clients." It was a good picture and a good caption. Louis carried it around in his billfold for two or three years, before he exchanged it for another picture that showed him with two French Davis Cup tennis players.

A few months later it became known around the courthouse that Alfred Dellinick was now handling the entire legal business of the Steel Works. Exclusively. About that time Louis Dellinick went down to the Riviera for a well-deserved mid-winter holiday.

6

THE ORIENT EXPRESS was three hours late. Louis was disappointed. He had hoped to arrive at home during the hours of daylight. It would be nice to walk through the main street between six and seven P.M., displaying his new Riviera tan, when everybody was out for a walk. But by the time the porter had finally collected his luggage—three suitcases, one hat case, the small bag containing his brushes, brilliantine, perfume, talcum powder, nail files, hair net, his tennis rackets and the umbrella—it was ten P.M.

When one of the old, broken-down taxis finally showed up, Louis told the driver to go straight to the Café.

It was half-past ten now and the crowd was thinning out. The air was full of stale smoke. The card players and their kibitzers had loosened the attached collars of their shirts. Louis went down the stairs into the night club that was the basement.

His father was in "his" *chambre séparée*—they called it "Dellinick's *séparée*" and kept it for him even on Saturdays when the place was overcrowded. He sat there alone. A bottle of cognac was on the table. That had never happened before. Louis looked for a woman's purse or gloves on the table, thinking the girl had just left for a moment and would be back.

"Didn't you get my wire?" Louis said. Father and son didn't bother to shake hands. They never bothered about "sentimentalities."

"Sit down," said his father. "Get yourself a glass."

There was only one glass on the table.

"Are you alone?" Louis asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing."

"Here. Use my glass. You'll need a drink when I tell you the news."

* * *

Alfred Dellinick poured the cognac. A metallic blonde with almond-shaped eyes sat at the table next to the musicians' platform, which was reserved for the entertainers. Louis looked out of the *séparée* and the girl looked back, straight into his eyes. Her blonde hair fell down on one side of her head, reminding him of Britta's hair.

"Who's she?" Louis asked. "She must be new here." Yes, she does wear her hair like Britta, he thought.

"Not now," his father said. "We've got a few things to talk about. Listen, Louis. Matous wants to take all his business away from our firm."

Louis gave his father a quick glance. He saw that the old man wasn't joking. His father looked old tonight. Tired, his eyes deep-set. The lines were hard and sharp in his face. His skin was wrinkled.

"But everything was dandy only a few weeks ago."

"The board of directors told Matous to get rid of us."

"But why? Nothing's happened?"

His father shrugged. "They haven't forgotten that picture."

"What picture?"

"You and that client of yours on the front page of the Communist newspaper. 'Son of Capitalist Lawyer Wins Comrade Karas' Case.'"

"Oh, that. I thought that was all over."

"It isn't. The board of directors couldn't swallow it. A question of principle, they say. They're all a bunch of reactionary bastards."

The old man washed down his drink and smacked his lips.

"You should have heard me telling Matous what I thought of him and his board of directors. Sometimes I think I am the revolutionary in the family."

"The hell with them. We've got enough clients as it is."

"We have, have we? The Jonáš Brewery has notified me that

they'll terminate their contract with us as of December 31. Land & Son will quit. And that's only the beginning."

"What's Land got to do with Matous? They hate one another."

"You're too young to understand," his father said wearily. "Those big boys may have their little arguments among themselves, but in the fundamental issues they always stick together, no matter what happens. That's what Matous calls a question of principles."

"Some day," Louis said, "they'll all hang together." He kept looking at the blonde woman who wore her hair like Britta.

"I'm terribly worried, Louis," his father was saying. "I'm too old now to go broke. I've lost my money twice, but I was younger then."

Louis vaguely remembered a day after the first war, when his father had thrown a package of stocks and bonds on the table and said, "Well, that's all that's left. You can use it as wallpaper for the bathroom. But you'd better burn it." Funny things were happening all the time in this part of the world. Louis didn't know the meaning of money because he'd always had too much of it, but somehow, dimly, he realized that having money meant having that blonde woman over there, whenever he liked to, the headwaiter's bow, the friendly nod of the orchestra leader and a sun tan at the Riviera in the middle of the winter.

There was a commotion at the entrance door. A dark-haired girl wearing a fur coat over her white evening dress came in with three young men. Her black hair was framing her oval, white face. Louis looked at her. She stood there for a moment and said something to the men. Then they turned and left.

"Trudy Matous," Louis said to his father. "I'm sure it was her. And she saw me and——"

"She came back from Switzerland two weeks ago. Matous is giving his big ball next week." The old man added pointedly. "We are *not* invited this year."

Matous' ball was the most important social event in town. You were invited or you weren't. There was no in-between. You belonged or you didn't.

Louis couldn't think back to a ball to which his father, and later he, had not been invited. Things must be really bad, he thought. That blonde even holds her head the way Britta did, slightly cocked to the side. I think I'll take her home. Take her home and get it over with. Get Britta over with.

"Louis," said his father. "What made you join the Communists?"

Louis shrugged. "I never joined the Party."

"You were going around with them."

"One goes around with a lot of people, Father."

The old man nodded. "I wouldn't mind losing all my business and money if I knew that you acted out of your convictions, Louis. But I know that you didn't. All you wanted was to attract attention. Set yourself apart from the rest of them."

"You're talking like Kamin," said Louis, angrily. His father didn't listen.

"All that money I practically forced upon you. The drinks and ties and the women and the pleasure trips. Made you feel a little guilty, did they? So you had to go out and get yourself an alibi."

Louis looked at the blonde woman. She was crossing her legs. When she saw that he looked at her legs, she shifted them a little. Louis knew that his father was right. He had never acted against his convictions. "Convictions are merely another word for conveniences." When Louis felt that his convictions became inconvenient, he would change them. He had as many convictions as silk shirts and he changed them with equal ease.

He didn't want to think of it now. He swallowed his drink. It made him feel better. The blonde had good legs. He liked the swing of her calves. He got up.

"You take this too seriously," he said. "Matous will get over it. I'll be running along. I think I'll take that blonde home."

His father stared into his glass. He shrugged his shoulders and again it occurred to Louis how old he looked. "I'd rather not be with you now," the old man said.

Louis walked through the night club. Everybody looked at him. He regretted the lights were so dim. People couldn't see his tan. He was sure he was looking well; his eyebrows slightly

raised, one hand in his pocket, casual and easy, the *bon-vivant*, taking a leisurely walk across the stage.

He stood in front of the girl. When she looked up at him, he saw her face, a cold, plain face. He didn't like her face.

"Want to dance?" he said.

She got up, unsmiling. "Why not?" she said.

He didn't like her voice either. It wasn't Britta's voice. It was a high-pitched, artificial gramophone voice. He was sorry he had come for her.

"No," he said abruptly. "Where's your coat? I'm taking you home."

She shrugged, as though she was too lazy to say, "Why not?"

In Louis' room, she undressed and put her dress across the back of a chair, very carefully. She stood in her slip. He sat down on the chair, where her dress was, taking off his shoes. He looked at her. Her thighs were voluminous and way up, below her slip, he saw folds of flesh.

Closing his eyes, as he took off his shoes, he thought he could see Britta in her bathing suit. Her skin had been miraculously clean and her thighs were slim, well shaped, just right. No ugly marks, veins, folding flesh. He could see Britta running into the water, splashing the surf with her slim legs, her trim little body, her velvet voice, laughing in her throaty way. . . .

"What'sa matter?" the girl said. "Anything wrong with my legs?" She lifted her slip and looked down at herself. She didn't have on anything underneath.

"Don't talk. For God's sake, don't talk. You have to talk?"

He had never seen Britta like that—all the way down, everything. Never. He wished he had followed her. To Paris. To London. Anywhere.

"All right, all right, you don't have to blow up," she said. She took the cognac bottle and took a huge swallow out of it.

"Oh, shut up!" he shouted.

The girl stepped back. She looked frightened. She pushed the hair out of her face. She looked strange and vulgar now. She was nobody he'd ever seen or wanted to see. There was no resemblance. What a stupid fool he had been.

"Give me my dress. You're sitting on it."

He pulled the dress away from under him, without getting up. There was a tearing sound.

"Look, what you've done. Now you ruined my best dress and——"

"Shut up! Shut up! Get out of here! Talk to the headwaiter. He'll give you money! I'll pay him back. Only get out before I kill you!"

He took the cognac bottle and walked out of the room. He heard the entrance door being opened and closed and her steps going down on the stairway. The house door was locked and she would have trouble ringing for the janitor, but he didn't care. He didn't give a damn. He was wondering why Trudy Matous hadn't come into the night club. He was sure she had recognized him.

In his room was still the smell of the girl's cheap Coty powder. He opened all the windows and went into the other room where some cognac was left in the bottle.

He was sitting there, staring into the pale light of the morning, when his father came home. Alone.

"So Matous didn't invite us for his ball?" Louis said. "All right, then I'll go uninvited."

7

THE MATOUS BALL was given every year a few weeks after the end of the regular carnival season. Some of the solid citizens were apt to overlook the subtle implication of this arrangement. All the big, popular balls were held during the carnival season, the firemen's ball, the railroad men's shindig, the masked balls sponsored by the Actors' and Actresses' Guild, the sports clubs, the Alpine Society, the Red Cross, the Skaters, the Music Academy. By giving his ball a few weeks later, Matous set himself apart from and far above *hoi polloi*.

Everything was very *distingué* about his ball. Matous was a busy man but he made it a point to check carefully the guest list. Not eligible were people who during the year preceding the ball had filed suit against the Steel Works or their directors, or had been caught in a scandal, financial or moral. People who had earned a million or more, were invited regardless of lawsuits, scandals or flagrant infidelities.

The house had a fake Renaissance façade with classical columns which the architect put on when Matous refused to pay his outrageous bill. It was an act of vengeance and it succeeded entirely. Matous liked the atrocious façade.

He was a small, fat, asthmatic man with saliva on his lips who got red in the face at the slightest provocation. He had been a widower for many years. His only relation was his sister Amelia, an elderly spinster who lived in genteel seclusion in a small spa. She was a tall, bony woman, suffering from rheumatism that was made worse by her mania for cleanliness. When visitors came, she would watch them as they stepped on the light-gray carpet in the entrance hall. If their shoes were not clean enough, she told them to go out again and wipe their shoes on the big mat that showed an M for Matous.

Amelia had herself set the cold buffet in the large dining room, which still had the smell of camphor, in spite of protracted airings. The room was never used throughout the year. There was an ingenious flower arrangement in the middle of the table, with spring violets spelling M for Matous. Another M had been carved into the forehead of the large pig's-head, which was widely admired as the *pièce de résistance*, with the white roses sticking out of the pig's nostrils and ears.

The food was arranged in a somewhat haphazard way. The roast chickens and ducks were next to marzipan pastry, and cold ham, cold beef, eggs in mayonnaise, cheese were gaily interspersed with *marrons glacés*, *mille-feuilles*, herring in sour cream, croissants, *petit fours*, *pâté de foie*, Roquefort, cranberry sauce, salmon, pickles, little omelets with champignons, Hungarian salami, smoked eel and pineapple cake. There were three chocolate roulades, a *Sachertorte*, a *Linzerkuchen* and cheese strudel.

Once a photo reporter from the Communist newspaper had managed to get into the dining room. After snatching a couple of Beluga caviar canapés, he made a close-up of the table arrangement which was published the following day on the front page under the caption, MILLIONS STARVE WHILE MATOUS FEASTS. The picture had caused quite a stir among the workers of the Steel Works and the board of directors. Ever since then Matous had taken "precautions." He was a friend of the police director, who promised to arrange for two uniformed guards to stand in front of the entrance door.

Trudy stood behind her father, giving the people a polite smile, as they came by. Everybody agreed that the finishing school in Switzerland had made "another woman" out of her. She seemed self-assured and was holding up her head like a successful actress. She seemed to realize that she was a pretty girl. She was pretty in an uncommon, refined way. The boys wondered whether she'd go to bed with them and their mothers wondered whether she'd marry their sons. One day Trudy would inherit her father's money, the big house and the small place in the mountains. She was the richest girl in town.

* * *

Kamin had been surprised when he received his invitation to the Matous ball in the mail, a few days after he had arrived in town. Kamin lived in Paris but he would come home every year once or twice to see his uncle and for a variety of other reasons, none of which really made his trip necessary.

"There must be a mistake," he said to his uncle. "I'm not an important person. And certainly not a potential customer of the Steel Works."

"You are a literary man," Uncle Jaques said. "You had a book published in Paris. They are impressed."

"Why don't you come with me?"

"What for? I would offend a lot of people. Besides, the food is inferior at Matous' parties. Last year they didn't even serve whole goose livers with truffles, but had a kind of imitation *pâté de foie*, one fifth goose liver and four fifths chicken and horse livers."

Kamin met Trudy in the entrance hall. She kissed him on the cheeks. He took her into his arms and lifted her up. She was light and pretty.

"Did *you* invite me?" he asked her.

She laughed. "When I heard you were in town, I snatched one of the cards from my father's desk and sent it to you."

"I guess you didn't tell your father?"

"No. Father said not more than three hundred and fifty persons. He already had to scratch a couple of general directors and other big shots." She took his arm and said, "Let's sit down and talk."

They sat down in a corner of the dining room which was still empty. A few people came in to furtively snatch some food but when they saw Trudy in her corner, they stole away.

"It's good seeing you, Kamin. How's Paris?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"Aren't you bored to come here?"

"I love this place. The parks where I had my first dates. The food shops. The lot behind the New Church where we would play football, hiding from school. They've built a big apartment house there. Its not so much the town I like to re-visit, but my own youth, I'guess."

"It's funny," she said, staring absently into space. "We never had a flirtation. We came close once, though, I remember. You took me to the movie house, and afterwards we walked back through the dark park. You kissed me there."

He didn't remember.

She was sad. "Men never remember. I was delirious. I was terribly in love with you, for two days."

It was the kind of talk which proved that you couldn't be in love any more.

"Kamin," she said suddenly. "I think you are in love."

It had always been hard to hide things before Trudy. "How did you know?"

"A blind person could see it. When you sober men fall in love, you drool all over."

He shrugged helplessly and she said, "Who is she? Do I know her?"

He shook his head.

"A French girl? I know, they can be very intriguing."

He was glad to talk to somebody about Britta. "She is a lovely English girl. You know them? When they are lovely, they are wonderful."

"Can't you say anything but lovely? It sounds so silly coming from you."

"I guess all men in love are silly."

She sighed. "Are you very much in love?"

"I'm a hopeless case, Trudy. I see her in every blonde woman that I meet on the street."

She broke into laughter. "Kamin, dear, I would never have thought that you were the romantic type. Didn't you always go with Michael to that house across the tracks?"

"That is why I have become a romantic. How about you, Trudy?"

She was biting her lower lip. "I still have *some* illusions," she said, without facing him.

"I thought it was all over?" It was strange to meet Louis wherever one went.

"So did I." She shook her head four or five times in rapid succession. "It's no use, Kamin. I've tried so hard to forget, believe me."

"Is he coming tonight?"

"Father said he doesn't ever want to see him."

Kamin didn't look at her. "Maybe your father was right."

"Why?"

"I don't think Louis is good enough for you, Trudy."

She stamped her foot. "Now you're talking like father. Always looking at everything from the accountant's viewpoint. Debit against credit. If the books don't balance, it's bad business. I don't care whether they balance or not." She recalled the scene with her father.

"We should have invited Doctor Dellinick," Trudy had said. "After all, he is your lawyer."

"He *was*," Matous replied, looking over the invitation list for the last time.

"What happened?"

"I tried my best to save him. But they don't want to have anything to do with a man whose son is a Communist. Now, I'm certainly not a reactionary, but I confess that I share their viewpoint. It's——"

"I know, it's a question of principle," said Trudy tartly.

Matous looked at her in amazement. Ever since she'd come back from Switzerland, Trudy had funny ideas of her own. It was disturbing. You didn't expect things like that to go around in a fine finishing school for privileged girls in Switzerland. Why, the Swiss had been making money out of both sides during the 1914 War. Even the workers were would-be capitalists there and the banks, their wonderful banks, had so much money that they refused to pay any interest on deposits and charged you with a special handling fee for graciously taking your money. Matous knew. Every month he managed to smuggle some money out of his country, into one of these wonderful, staid, conservative Swiss banks. The law didn't allow you to do it but it was all right as long as nobody knew.

"Besides," Matous said. "Alfred Dellinick is a crook."

"You've let that crook handle your affairs for eleven years."

"That's different. That's business. But I don't have to invite him to my house. What's the matter with you, anyway, Trudy? You still haven't got this good-for-nothing out of your system? Here I'm sending you to Switzerland, spending all that money——"

"We've gone into that before," said Trudy wearily, walking away.

* * *

By midnight it was evident that the ball was a success. A textile tycoon passed out, fell down on the carpet and had to be taken to the lavatory. A department store owner who had been in jail for income tax evasion gave up all inhibitions and told the ladies a few risqué stories which his cellmates had told him. The police director's wife got into a fight with the wife of a deputy and spilled red wine on the light gray carpet, which badly upset Matous' sister. A famous interior decorator persuaded Madame Halik, the blonde, voluptuous wife of the

abortionist, Doctor Halik, to come with him upstairs where the bedrooms were.

Louis Dellinick came in after midnight. The policeman guarding the door was yawning wearily, too tired even to think of the leftover food he could take home to his family.

"Good morning, my friend," said Louis, jovially. He was always good at handling people, all kinds of people. "I'm late, am I? You look like you've had a long night of it."

"Never too late to do my duty, sir," said the policeman, sententiously.

"That's right," said Louis and walked in, without bothering about an invitation which he didn't have.

He left his coat and top hat at the wardrobe and gave himself a quick going-over in front of the large mirror. He liked to wear a full-dress suit. Made him taller. The white tie and white shirt brought out his Riviera tan. He stroked his temples and walked into the ballroom. He saw Trudy right away. She was dancing with Kamin.

Louis walked through the room, without saying hello to anybody. "May I?" he said, giving Trudy a glorious smile.

Trudy was blushing.

"Didn't know you were here too, old man," Louis said to Kamin. "We've been together on the Riviera," he explained to Trudy.

"You didn't tell me," she said to Kamin, with faint reproach.

"Oh, we had a great time," Louis said. He laughed and put his hands around Trudy's shoulder. "Let's try this tango."

She was silent. He felt that she was keeping away from him. "Are you running away from me?"

Her lips were pressed together. "Why should I?"

"I thought so last week, at the night club." He looked down at her straight, white shoulders. "You saw me there, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said unexpectedly. "That's why I didn't want to stay there."

"So you *are* running away!"

"I don't care much to see you, Louis."

He smiled his confident smile. "You've changed, Trudy. You are beautiful."

"Coming from you," she said tartly, "that must be quite a compliment. You have become known around here as the leading connoisseur, I am told."

He looked down at her. For a moment their eyes met and then he knew that nothing had changed.

She cleared her throat. "I heard the bad news about the termination of the contract. I'm sorry."

"Oh, that's all right." He hadn't come to talk business tonight.

She pressed his arm. "Louis, I never knew that you did care about people. Kamin told me how you won the case of that poor invalid worker."

Louis looked surprised.

"I think it was fine of you to take on the case," she said.

He seemed startled. "You, Trudy? Matous' daughter?"

"Now you're talking just like my father."

"Let's get out of here. Your father's coming. If he sees me here, he'll have a stroke."

They went out into the corridor. He slid his arm under her armpit, brushing his hand slightly against her breast. She had grown up. She looked like a Velasquez painting, with her long, dark hair falling down on her white shoulders. But there was something missing. Too bad she didn't really excite him. Perhaps her beauty was too tranquil for his taste.

They passed the door of a bedroom as Madame Halik came out. Her blonde hair was mussed up. She seemed to have put on her make-up in a perfunctory way.

"Hello," she said to both of them, looking straight at Louis.

"Hello," he said. He had to be with Trudy now! Just now when he could have gone with Madame Halick. Probably she had been with a fellow who didn't quite live up to her expectations.

"Wonder who the happy man was?" he said, thinking aloud.

She shrugged. She didn't care. She never did—that was the trouble with Trudy.

He held the door to the winter garden open for Trudy, and looked back over his shoulder at Madame Halik. He thought she smiled at him. He waited until Trudy had gone into the winter garden and went in after her. It was dark there and they were alone.



It hadn't been difficult at all. "Not at all," said Louis a few hours later at home to his father. "Trudy was mad about me. As always. I didn't have to talk much. I just—Oh, you know."

Alfred Dellinick made a grunting noise in his throat. "And now?"

"You don't think he would take the law business away from his future son-in-law? And from the father of his son-in-law?"

The elder Dellinick sat up in his bed. He was genuinely amazed.

"So it's all settled?"

"Yes, sir. It's all settled. Trudy gets a cool million on the eve of her wedding." Louis laughed. He looked down at his pants. They were creased. "I had to finish that part of the business in a hurry. Madame Halik was waiting."

"Madame Halik? What about her?"

"She went upstairs with that precious little interior decorator. He was just an *hors d'oeuvre* for her. I came in for the main dish."

Louis laughed. Then he saw that his father didn't laugh. He wondered whether his father was feeling sick. Or old maybe.

"I never thought I would have so much fun with the Halik woman the night I got engaged to Trudy," Louis said. The thought amused him. "Now all I have to do is to sell Trudy the idea of going to Paris on our honeymoon."

He untied his white tie. There was a reddish spot of goulash soup on the tie. The stupid, provincial idea of serving goulash soup at a ball. He wondered what Britta would say to that. He didn't want to think of Britta.

"Maybe I can get away from Paris to London on my own for a few days. A few nights, I should say."

"To London?" his father said. "What for?"

"Some unfinished business." Louis looked at the red stain. Might as well throw the tie away.

"A woman?" his father asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Don't overdo things, Louis. You mustn't fool around with other women on your honeymoon."

"Why not?"

His father was silent. Louis wondered again whether old age was creeping up on his father—whether he suddenly feared something.

"I didn't have any money to take your mother on a honeymoon. No money at all. Things were so bad that we were eating garlic soup in those days. She would take old pieces of bread, put garlic over them and then pour hot water over it. That was our garlic soup."

Louis looked at his father in amazement. It was the first time his father had talked about his wife.

"Sometimes," Dellinick said, "I wish I had been able to take her on a honeymoon. Everything might have turned out much better if we'd had a better start."

"Father," Louis said. "What's the matter? Aren't you feeling well?"

"Don't be a goddamn fool! I just don't like the idea of your taking the Matous girl to Paris and fooling around with that silly French banker's wife."

"It's not the banker's wife. She is a girl in London."

"You were not in London?"

"I met her in Nice."

"Oh, the hell with her. Let me have the cognac bottle." After a while, the old man said, "Have you heard about Marion Mara?"

"No."

"She's become a big star in Germany. An operetta diva. Jesus! Imagine, Marion a diva. Sleeping with all those swine, no doubt. I slapped her face when she came back, remember? I should have slapped her harder."

He got out of bed. "I'll take a shower. We'll go to the office. We can drop by at Matous' on our way. I want to say hello to my new relation."

8

NOT EVERYBODY in Paris has a home but most everybody has a café. Kamin was living in a small room on the fifth floor of a hotel *garnie* in one of the streets leading up the Place Pigalle, in the heart of Montmartre. Around the corner, on the rue Pigalle, was the Bar des Artistes, where Kamin had his apéritif before and the digestif after his meals. He would go there when there was nothing else to do. He felt more at home in the Bar des Artistes than in his hotel room.

The Bar des Artistes was strictly a family establishment. Monsieur Roget, the *patron*, acted as an over-all manager, ordered the wines and did all the talking to the coal man, the ice man and the man from the telephone company. Madame Roget sat behind the cash register. Frequently she would control the cash register by making her own additions on a scrap of paper; Madame didn't trust anybody and that went for people as well as for machines. She carried a small key under her blouse which opened the small safe under the counter where the vintage champagne bottles were locked away. Fernande, their daughter, helped out behind the cash register during the day. Marcel, the nephew of the Rogets, worked behind the counter.

Two years ago, when Monsieur Roget had celebrated his fiftieth birthday, he had decided to retire. He had been brought up in the tradition that a God-and-franc-loving Frenchman must not be working at the age of fifty. Monsieur Roget owned a small piece of land near the Porte d'Italie, where he raised a few chickens. It wasn't much of a place but what with the

prices of chicken and eggs going up all the time, it wasn't a bad investment. Nothing like a piece of land in those inflationary times.

Monsieur Roget liked to say that things today were worse now than they had been ten years ago when he had lost most of his money in the Stavisky scandal. Monsieur Roget had the deep, almost atavistic, French fear of the Boche. The newspapers were full of stories about Spain but Monsieur Roget didn't give a hoot about Spain. Luckily, President Lebrun had opened the International Exposition on May 24. That would bring a lot of Americans to Paris. Americans had most of the money and it was good money too. Too bad one couldn't get the money of the Americans without having to put up with them.

Monsieur Roget sighed wistfully and gave his curled-up moustache a snappy twirl. Nobody liked the Americans as people; but everybody on Montmartre liked to have them as customers. You could charge them higher prices. The Bar des Artistes had more American clients than any other place on the rue Pigalle, owing to Marcel the bartender's knowledge of the English language and his ability to mix that strange American concoction, *le cock-tail*.

Marcel was husky, blond and had blue eyes. He was engaged to Fernande. When some clients expressed amazement at his un-French looks he would explain that he was *un vrai Viking*. He also was *un vrai cosmopolite*. He had served two years in the Foreign Legion in Indo-China from where he had brought back a hot temper, a lingering stomach trouble and a tendency to use his fists to settle arguments. This naturally resulted in many broken glasses. After Marcel finished his argument with a client, Madame Roget would count the broken glasses and deduct them from Marcel's salary. Marcel didn't object; what made him mad was that Madame—his future mother-in-law, mind you—bought all glassware wholesale and would charge him the retail price, making a tidy profit on him.

Marcel's stomach trouble forced him to run to the lavatory every once in a while. During his absence Madame Roget han-

dled the *comptoir*, much to the dissatisfaction of the clients. Madame frequently violated an unwritten French law which prescribes that all *apéritif*-, *digestif*-, wine- and beer-glasses must always be filled up to the brim. The clients objected violently, and by the time Marcel returned from the lavabo there would be a heated argument. Madame was enraged about Marcel who always took the side of the customer. "You'll never amount to anything," she'd say. "You'll wind up a no-good like your father."

Marcel's father, Monsieur Roget's younger brother, had been the family villain. After a short and diversified career on the pavements of Montmartre with all *agents de police* of the *arrondissement* hot on his trail, Philippe Roget had left *la belle France* and escaped to America, *le pays des gangsters*, where, Madame pointed out venomously, he would be perfectly at home.

Before leaving, Philippe—doubtless as a measure of precaution against possible hard times in America—appropriated the savings of Madame Roget, which were hidden in a torn black silk stocking under her mattress; eleven thousand five hundred and thirty-seven francs, thirty centimes. Philippe took eleven thousand, five hundred and thirty francs and left the seven francs, thirty centimes by way of a *pourboire*. Philippe had always been generous with other people's money.

Now, fourteen years later, Madame was settling her account with Philippe, by way of his innocent offspring. Marcel and Fernande had fallen in love vehemently and beautifully after his return from Indo-China. They wanted to get married right away but Madame said there was going to be no wedding before Marcel paid off every cent of his father's debt, including an accumulated five and a half per cent. Poor Marcel wouldn't have had five francs in his pocket if he hadn't learned in the Foreign Legion to play poker. Sometimes he played with the guests and made thirty or forty francs, enough to buy flowers for Fernande. She loved flowers.

Monsieur Roget didn't approve of his wife's attitude. "It's not fair to punish Marcel for something his father did practically before Marcel was born," he would say to his wife. "Be-

sides, Philippe is now doing all right, as the sole American representative of Lemonnier & Fils, Fine Wines and Champagnes."

"Father now lives at the Plaza Hotel in New York," Marcel said, pouring a glass of Dubonnet so skillfully that he filled it right up to the brim and didn't spill a single drop. "Damn fine place. Like the Ritz here." He pointed at the mirror behind the counter. Stuck into it were a great many picture postcards from America, which Philippe Roget had sent to his son. "That's the Plaza. *Pas mal*."

Monsieur Roget agreed. "It must cost him a pretty penny to live there."

"What makes you think he *lives* there?" said Madame. "I'm sure he goes into the lobby and collects these cards from the tables. If he's so well off, as you two maintain, why hasn't he ever sent us anything? Why doesn't he pay back his debt?" She shrugged. "He doesn't care about his relations. Money is all he cares about."

Madame Roget slapped the wet towel down on the counter in righteous indignation.

A slim, dark, petite girl came in. She kissed Marcel, Madame and Monsieur, in that order. She had a little nose and dark eyes and was very chic.

"Go wash up, Fernande," said Madame. "We'll get supper ready. You must not be late for the Folies. People who want to get ahead in life can't afford to be late."

The girl said, "*Oui, maman*," kissed Marcel again on the mouth and went into the living room which was separated from the bar through a glass door. Fernande had studied *le dance classique* and was now working at the Folies Bergère. She had started in the chorus, showing her nice, firm breasts, but now she was *une attraction*. That meant she wore more clothes and got more money. She danced two solo numbers, a Spanish Flamenco and a Javanese sword dance. Her name appeared on the program, together with the other attractions, way down in small type. But there was no reason why it shouldn't be there some day on top, in large, fat type, as a *vedette*. Fernande prayed for that. She was always praying. She

had been brought up, morally and severely, by the Good Sisters in the Convent Sainte-Marie des Anges, where she had been the favorite pupil of the old abbé Gabriel.

Owing to Fernande's evening schedule, she had an early dinner with her parents at six-thirty. At that time, business was heavy at the bar and Marcel had to stay behind the counter. Madame would sit at the head of the table from where she could survey the *rôti d'agneau* on the table as well as Marcel at the bar.

On Mondays and Tuesdays *le bébé* would join them for dinner. *Le bébé* was a nephew of a second cousin of Madame's. He was forty-three years old but since he happened to be the youngest of nine brothers and sisters, everybody kept calling him "baby."

Le bébé's name was Gaston but nobody ever called him that. He was the manager of a shooting gallery on the Boulevard de Clichy, which specialized in *risqué* targets, the figures of American movie stars wearing bathing suits. When the target was hit, the bathing suits slid down, displaying what *le bébé* called *l'anatomie de Hollywood*. For those clients who didn't care to study the anatomy of Hollywood on a hit-or-miss basis, the management had installed a little apparatus where one could see, by dropping one franc into a slit, a series of short motion pictures called "Tales Scheherazade Didn't Tell," "Secrets of the Harem," "Secrets of Park Avenue."

The motion pictures were produced on the spot, in the establishment of Madame Soulanges, in which *le bébé* had a financial interest. Madame Soulanges' *maison* was conveniently located in a dark side street of the Rue de Pigalle, not far from the Bar des Artistes. It was a sophisticated place; the rates were doubled for Americans and Englishmen, some of whom had the disconcerting habit of bringing their own wives into the *maison*. This would lead to all sorts of trouble since some of the lady visitors were more eager, though necessarily less skilled in the tricks of the trade, than the *pensionnaires*.

Le bébé, a chronic worrier, was deeply concerned about his financial investment in the *maison*. He would walk up and

down the Rue Pigalle, accosting lonely gentlemen whom he addressed, "Will you beautiful girls?" When the prospects didn't understand, *le bébé* repeated the question. His cousin Marcel had often explained to him that you don't say, "Will you beautiful girls?" but *le bébé*, like most French, wasn't very good with foreign languages.

"They know damn well what I mean, *mince alors*," he would say.

Kamin had come to distinguish two groups of customers at the Bar des Artistes, the regulars and the *clients*. The regulars were night-club musicians, waiters, clerks, schoolteachers and *filles-de-joie*, people living and working in the arrondissement.

Madame Roget took a dim view of the musicians but she couldn't turn them out because her husband had once been a musician himself. He cherished the memories of those carefree uninhibited days as much as he now liked his chicken-and-eggs place near the Porte d'Italie. He would offer free drinks to his musical friends and they would sit there reminiscing, winking at one another with that knowing look that reminded them of wild orgies in their younger days. Sometimes Madame Roget couldn't help wondering whether it hadn't been merely her chastening influence that had saved him from a fate worse than that which had befallen his brother Philippe. She liked to say to the abbé Gabriel that if it were not for her, Monsieur Roget would wind up straight in hell.

The abbé agreed, with reservations. "Everybody has a chance to go to heaven if he repents in time," he said. He was a kindly old man with a Cyrano-ish nose. "We are all creatures of the Lord."

"If you ask me, Monsieur l'abbé," said Madame Roget, "He must have been in a very bad mood when He created the musicians."

The second group of customers were the *clients*: foreigners, tourists and assorted suckers who were attracted by the sign which Marcel had nailed to the door: AMERICAN COCKTAILS.

Madame Roget didn't quite understand the magic of this sign but it certainly worked. The suckers would come in right

away. They would ask for un *Martini*, or un *Man-attan*, and they would watch Marcel with ecstasy while he did gymnastic exercises with the shaker.

Marcel was a pretty sight, in his blue apron, his shirt sleeves rolled up, showing the tattoos on his hairy, strong forearms, and the Americans would look at him like camels in the desert approaching the well of an oasis.

The cocktails were priced at three francs, twice as much as the average *apéritif*. Madame had once tasted one. It was beyond her how anybody would want to pay three francs for such a concoction.



MR. OVERSTREET had discovered the Bar des Artistes one evening late in the summer of 1937, after seeing the show at the Moulin Rouge and promenading down the rue Pigalle. On the corner of a dark side street a furtive-looking man with up-turned coat collar and bad teeth had approached him, his hands in his pockets.

"Will you beautiful girls?" the man had whispered.

Harry W. Overstreet understood at once, and he couldn't help being flattered. His wife used to say, rather pointedly, that he was getting old; but just because a man is fifty-five—well, almost fifty-six—and has thinning gray hair, high blood pressure and a tendency toward gaining weight, he doesn't have to *feel* old. Standing there, breathing the sounds and smells of Montmartre, the irritating mixture of jasmine, Pernod, perfume, chestnuts, women and gasoline, Mr. Overstreet felt younger than ever before in his life.

"Will you beautiful girls?" the man repeated, more urgently. "*Spécialités Parisiennes. Les trente-deux positions.*"

Mr. Overstreet took off his gold-rimmed glasses, took one

end of his white shirt out of his pants, cleaned his glasses, put the glasses back on and stuffed the end of his shirt back into his pants. He had always wanted to visit a real, honest-to-goodness House of Vice so he could tell the boys back home. Mr. Overstreet had had his modest share of vice—there was the backroom of the café on the outskirts of Hartford, the chintzy apartment on East Fifty-Sixth and the very special speakeasy he had gone to in the old days—but of course this was Paris, the real McCoy. Having missed all the fun with the A.E.F. in 1918, owing to his bad ticker, Mr. Overstreet had always felt sadly frustrated when the boys started their Gay Paree tales.

Tonight was Monday, a good night. His wife was parked safely at the Ritz, playing bridge with the Comptons. The Comptons were neighbors of the Overstreets back home in Westchester County. They had been playing bridge with Mrs. Overstreet every Monday for the past eleven years and there was no reason on earth why they shouldn't have their little game just because they all happened to be in Paris.

"Will you beautiful girls?" the man whispered. "You like whips? *Les jeux du Marquis de Sade*?"

Mr. Overstreet, playing nervously with his watch chain with the Phi Beta Kappa key on it, remembered sinister tales of American tourists being held up and beaten to pulp by thugs in dark alleys. He had a lot of money on him.

"Maybe another night," he said, somewhat embarrassed. "Maybe I'll come back one night with Mr. Compton."

The furtive-looking man saw his prospect fade away. He made a last-ditch effort. "Will you cocktail?" he said. "American cocktail?" *Le bébé* had an arrangement with Madame Roget that gave him fifteen per cent on all new clients.

"A cocktail? Now, after midnight?" said Mr. Overstreet. But the man seized his arm and pointed across the street to the Bar des Artistes.

Mr. Overstreet liked the place at sight. It was more fun than to have drinks at the Ritz bar. He prided himself on being a man of imagination, an artist at heart, with a taste for local color.

It was past midnight now and Mr. Overstreet was having

his third drink. Any similarity between this concoction and a real Martini was strictly coincidental but Mr. Overstreet had learned that you can't have both Martinis *and* local color.

A pretty, spicy little girl came in. Mr. Overstreet was beginning to get some ideas about her but she kissed the husky bartender. *Le bébé* told Mr. Overstreet in his halting English that she was Madame Roget's daughter. "Fernande dances at the Folies Bergère," he said.

"Gee," said Mr. Overstreet. A real, genuine Folies Bergère girl! Wait till he told Compton about that.

Around one A.M. business would pick up sharply at the Bar des Artistes. The musicians came back from their *cachets* in cafés and dance halls, and some of the *pensionnaires* working in Madame Soulanges' *maison* would come over for a quick drink between jobs and for a sandwich. The sandwiches were made to order by Madame Roget. They consisted of fifteen-inch-long pieces of white bread, cut lengthwise, with a hardly visible slice of ham in between. The ham was as thin as onion-skin paper.

Kamin would come into the bar around one, after he'd finished his work. He liked to write at night, but after a while his hotel room gave him claustrophobia. It was a nice room, as rooms in a Paris *hotel garni* go, but it was hardly larger than the bed. There was a wash basin with the inevitable *bidet*, a miniature table with a chair and a closet. This arrangement was somewhat confusing. The closet had to remain open when he liked to sit at the table; when he wanted to go to bed, the closet had to be closed and the chair pushed close to the table. The arrival of a visitor necessitated closing the closet, putting the table into the only available corner and shoving the chair toward the bed.

Fortunately Kamin's visitors were not fussy. They were all *gens du quartier*, musicians, doormen, students, assorted artists. Sometimes Renée came over. Renée lived in the room across from the air shaft. She had *un ami* in Rouen, an industrialist who came to board meetings in Paris every other week. Kamin expressed amazement at the industrialist's letting Renée stay in the modest room.

"I prefer to send the money he gives me to my family in Grenoble," Renée said. "They need it more than I do."

Renée liked to be with Kamin, when her friend didn't show up or when she had "that crying feeling." She would depart very quietly in the morning because she knew that Kamin liked to sleep late. Their relationship had all the pleasant lightness and none of the emotional complications of what the *gens du quartier* called "a little friendship."

Every evening after seven o'clock the hotel smelled of onion soup, which the *patron* and his wife ate night after night. They were thrifty people who did all the work in the hotel, changing the linen once a week, cleaning the rooms in a perfunctory way. The *patronne* served breakfast when desired, sweet chocolate and crisp croissants. When Kamin had breakfast, he would skip the lunch and have dinner at the *prix fixe rôtisserie*. He was on friendly terms with Lucien, a limping old waiter, who would tell Kamin what *not* to eat.

It was a simple life, without the luxuries that go with wealth, but it meant independence. Kamin was free to do the things he liked, to write only what he wanted to write. He had friends and there were no business strings attached to his friendships. He had to cater to no one.

At the Bar des Artistes he was considered a regular, "almost a Frenchman," as they said. He knew about the family quarrels of the Rogets, the little joys and tragedies of the *pensionnaires* of Madame Soulanges, the musicians, the schoolteachers and M. Brasseur, the policeman. He was tolerated by Madame Roget. He was said to have fallen in and out of love in fair intervals, had his *carte d'identité* renewed in time, discussed American jazz and French politics, and was no *mystère* at all. Like all writers he had a few *fantastique* ideas. Kamin's favorite "fantastic idea" was to go to America.

"America? Pffff!" *Le bébé* would raise his arm in a gesture of disgust. "Why do the Americans come over here and try so hard to have a good time? Why do they go back with tears in their eyes? Because no one has a good time in America. They are so busy raising cattle, building skyscrapers and playing gangsters that they haven't got time for a good time. I ask you,

Monsieur," he turned toward Mr. Overstreet, "have you good food in America? Have you any good wine? And your women? They make love like—like——" *Le bébé* was trying hard to find the right word; "alarm clocks. You wind them up, off they go, and after a while you wind them up again. *Pas d'imagination.*" Owing to his business transactions which frequently involved Americans, *le bébé* was acknowledged as the local authority on Love in America.

"Have you ever had any—hmmm, experience with American women?" Mr. Overstreet asked.

"Monsieur," *le bébé* said with great dignity, "a Frenchman doesn't depend on research in matters of love. He has the true sense of intuition."

"All the same, I want to go to America," said Kamin.

"Bravo!" said Mr. Overstreet.

M. Roget said, "Its hard to make a decision." M. Roget always found it hard to make a decision.

Mr. Overstreet said, "How about another bottle of champagne? We've got to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" said M. Roget.

Mr. Overstreet felt wonderful. "We'll find the reason later. Just bring the champagne."

"The expensive one?" Madame Roget asked.

"Sure."

Madame Roget took a key out from under her brassière and opened the safe under the counter. "There are some nice Americans after all," she said to her husband. "This Overstreet—*c'est un type très généreux.*"

Mr. Overstreet wiped his glass with the end of his shirt and asked Kamin in a whisper whether Kamin had ever been at the *maison* of Madame Soulanges.

"Sometimes *le bébé* takes me for a drink," said Kamin.

"*Le bébé* always wants me to go there," said Mr. Overstreet. "But tonight he shook hands with me and brought me right away here."

"You've made the grade," Kamin said. "You are now considered officially one of the regulars."

Mr. Overstreet slapped Kamin's shoulder. "Well, there's the reason for our celebration!"

The party broke up after two o'clock. Mr. Overstreet was not quite steady on his feet but turned down the suggestion of riding to his hotel in a taxi. "How about walking down with me?" he asked Kamin.

"Fine. It's a beautiful night."

The acacias in front of Notre Dame de Lorette were in full bloom and the air between the old houses seemed to be heavy with the scent of flowers and whispered words of love.

"I haven't had so much fun since I was a boy in Jersey City," Mr. Overstreet said.

"You still live there?" Kamin asked.

"I've come a long way," Mr. Overstreet said, his voice dripping with satisfaction. "I started out in business with a mere two hundred dollars which I had to borrow at that. Look at me, today. President, chairman of the board and majority stockholder of Harry W. Overstreet Associates. Biggest outfit in the fund-raising line in the States. Wonderful country, my boy. Wonderful country where a man starts out with two hundred bucks and can reach the top in his lifetime."

"Who are the Harry W. Overstreet Associates?" asked Kamin. "Easy, there. Don't stumble."

Mr. Overstreet stopped and gave Kamin a mildly annoyed look. "Don't tell me you haven't heard of the Harry W. Overstreet Associates?" He shook his head and said, "Of course. I keep forgetting that this isn't New York. Back home in the big city *everybody* knows us. We specialize in hospital charities and we're leaders in raising community funds. Members of the American Association of Fund-Raising Council."

Mr. Overstreet went on to explain what he called his "line." "Take a \$750,000 Chest drive. That's one of the smallest quotas, of course. Our firm takes care of the whole business, for a flat fee, win, lose or draw." He shook his head a few times in rapid succession. "A campaign is planned months in advance, down to the smallest detail. We make estimates. We know, down to the nearest \$1000, just how much can be raised

in a community. The rest is easy. We build our lists, rating every potential donor. Our campaign director on the spot sends out literature, instructs his staff of volunteers, visits the local newspapers. We send out luncheon speakers, contact the civic leaders, the clergy, leading business men. Volunteer teams do the actual soliciting, while we survey the general strategy. It's a fascinating business, my boy."

The Harry W. Overstreet Associates had developed a revolutionary philanthropic principle: Don't pump only the rich and middle classes; remember the almost untouched field, the poor.

Mr. Overstreet had created, out of a lifetime's experience, a long list of taboos. The word "sucker" was never mentioned—not even jokingly on an inter-office memorandum. No after-luncheon speech was to be longer than forty-five minutes. Never drink while on the job; never give any promises when you wangle free publicity in the papers or on the radio. Mr. Overstreet would never start a campaign unless the chances of winning were better than par; he would never ask for less than a man could give, and often he asked for more. People's vanity was greater than their reluctance to part with their money.

"We don't merely preach philanthropy," Mr. Overstreet said to Kamin. "We bring them cultural and emotional advancement, the encouragement of the virtue of giving that uplifts the spirit of men and women all[†] over the world. . . ."

Mr. Overstreet sounded as though he'd made this speech many times before. He rattled off the words with great gusto. They were walking through the Rue de la Paix, in the beautiful city of Paris. The obelisk on the Place Vendôme stood out against the moonlight but Mr. Overstreet was back in his oak-wood-paneled office in Rockefeller Center, his real and only home.

"We secure the co-operation of the press. We put up banners, flags, posters. Giant thermometers cover the place. Then we get to work on the women. The women in America own eighty per cent of all the wealth, you know."

Kamin listened attentively. America was a perplexing though perhaps a great country.

"We have put over successfully more Chest drives than any other firm in the field," Mr. Overstreet said. "Give us any community in the good old U.S.A. and we'll spiral them into a frenzy of donating."

They had reached the entrance of the Ritz Hotel. The doorman was sitting inside, sleeping in a chair by the door. A couple of dogs were chasing around the obelisk.

"Yes, it's a great business," Mr. Overstreet was saying. "And we always need people with fresh ideas. Nothing like a blood transfusion. When you come over to America, you must visit our offices. We may even be in business together. You never know."

They went into the lobby.

"Think it over," said Mr. Overstreet. "It's a great business. We can always use a bright young man." He shook hands with Kamin and went into the elevator.

Kamin walked toward the entrance door. A girl came in from the street. She was slim and there was music in her motion, as she came walking through the lobby, her high heels clicking. The light from the desk shone on her face, a face that Kamin had never forgotten, through all those months. He felt a slight pain in the pit of his stomach as he recognized Britta Kent.

10

THEY WALKED OVER to Weber's and sat down on the terrace. In the early hours of the morning the Café looked as most Paris cafés look in American motion pictures. There was the standard collection of prostitutes, pimps, drunks and a few boisterous tourists from Dallas or Denver. An elegant man, wearing tails and a top hat, was eating bacon and eggs. He had a pleasantly tired look; possibly he had to fortify himself after a night

of strenuous amours. A few heavily painted *filles de joie* in the front row of the terrace gave the place the customary depraved glitter.

The waiter came and wiped off the round marble plate.

"*Café au lait*," Britta said.

"Same for me," said Kamin.

She laughed. "Isn't it rather early for breakfast?" It was three o'clock but she looked as pretty and fresh as he remembered her that evening in Nice. Prettier, perhaps. She had on a long dress of a light silky material with flowers, that brought out the line of her hips.

"We always seem to be meeting in big hotels," he said. "Always unexpectedly. Could it be fate?"

She gave a light shrug. "I don't believe in fate. It makes things too easy."

Even her voice hadn't changed, he thought. He had often tried to remember that evening in the hotel in Nice but the recollection was perturbingly vague. Nothing seemed clear and definite; it had been like a dream, with blurred edges. He remembered standing with Britta on the balcony overlooking the Promenade des Anglais. The smell of sea grass had come in from the ocean. He had been holding her hand but she had hardly been aware of it.

She offered him a cigarette.

"Thanks. I don't smoke."

He was silent. He was never good at telling a girl what he felt about her. "I've been thinking about you," he said, after a while. "I haven't seen you in eight months and yet I can remember every glance of yours, every word. Every nod of your head."

"You know so little about me. Nothing. And I don't know anything about you."

"There was a girl on an advertising billboard with hair like yours. Even her smile was like yours. It was a silly advertisement. She was standing in her underwear, trying to fix up a run in her stocking. The girl seemed to follow me everywhere. In newspapers, Métro stations, along the railroad tracks. Always made me think of you."

She leaned over and placed her hand on his.

"You're sweet," she said, softly.

"Once I saw a girl in a crowd. It was raining and she had an umbrella. I thought it was you."

"Where was it? Here in Paris?"

"Yes."

The waiter brought the coffee. "*Croissants? Brioches?*" he asked.

"Nothing." The waiter walked away. Kamin took Britta's hand. She didn't withdraw it. "Once I saw a girl in the Métro that looked like you."

"You must have seen quite a few that looked like me," she said, smiling as she played with his fingers. "Did you ask her for a date?"

"She was with a man. He seized her shoulders and pressed her close to himself. They were standing, swaying back and forth, staring into each other's eyes. Their lips were moving but I couldn't understand what they were saying. I got so terribly jealous that I had to get out at the next station." He shook his head. "How could I be jealous of you? I didn't even know where you were at the moment."

She told him that she was working for a big store in London and had come to Paris to buy perfumes. She was going back in two days.

"You always seem to be going away when I meet you," he said.

She didn't answer. He enjoyed looking at the clear line of her profile. She told him that her sister, Carol, had gone to America. "She is married to Jeff. Remember Jeff Baldwin from Maryland, who fell asleep in our bedroom and passed out?"

She was staring into space. "Jeff was so frightfully decent about the whole thing. Not every man would have married Carol in her situation."

"Her situation?"

"Don't you know? Haven't you——" She stopped. "But of course, you wouldn't know."

"Know what?"

So she told him the story. An old and always ugly story. It

had been Carol's very first experience. A few weeks later she found herself in trouble.

"Oh God," said Kamin.

"She always wanted to look and act so seductive," said Britta. "She was really an innocent girl and ashamed of being innocent. That's why she acted that way. She never grew up."

"Was Carol at all in love with Louis?" he asked.

"That was the worst part of it. She went to pieces afterwards. It was awful."

"I'm sure Louis didn't write her once."

"I'm sure he didn't even think of her."

"No." After a pause, "And then Jeff married her?"

"Jeff knew the truth. Everything. Jeff isn't a fool though sometimes he acts like one. He used to take Carol out. Trying to make her forget. I don't think she was much fun."

"Then why did he marry her?"

"He said to me once, 'She has your smile and she keeps her head cocked to the side as you do.'"

Kamin said, "That wasn't right. He wasn't in love with her. He was in love with you."

"She wasn't in love with him either. That made it a square deal, didn't it?"

"Maybe square—but not a good deal."

"Carol wanted to get away. She was all mixed up. When Jeff asked her she said yes, right away. Incidentally, she never had the child."

They walked back to her hotel. "Will you have lunch with me?" he said. "I want to spend the whole day with you. Every single hour."

She gently pressed his hand. "I have some business to take care of, but let's make it at five. Good night, dear. It was a lovely evening."

* * *

He slept only a few hours and was up at half-past nine. He awoke with the thought of Britta. If he'd had a phone by his bedside, he would have called her, but the hotel's only phone was in the *patronne's* drab parlor and Kamin didn't want to

talk to Britta with the *patronne* listening in. He lay there, with his eyes closed, going over every word Britta had said, the pressure of her hand, the inflection of her voice, and how her eyes had been closed when he had kissed her good-bye.

It was only thirty-five minutes past nine and he wondered how he would manage to live until five in the afternoon. It was going to be the longest day of his life. He shaved, very thoroughly, until his skin was so smooth that it hurt. He brushed his teeth and had breakfast and did a thousand things. It was only a quarter to eleven. The fingers of his watch didn't seem to move at all, but as soon as he would be with Britta, the watch would start running like mad.

No matter how slowly he walked there he got to the Ritz Hotel at half-past four. He glanced into the windows of the expensive shops at the Place Vendôme without being able to register any of the displays. He was at the lobby at five before five and called her up one minute before five. The phone rang twice and three times. He was holding his breath and felt the sharp thumping inside his chest and then he heard her voice.

"I'll be down in five minutes." She was punctual. She wore a simple blue suit and no hat. Her handbag, with belt and shoes matching, was made of gray mottled snakeskin.

He'd wanted to take her to the Bar des Artistes but he realized that she was dressed more for the Ritz bar. He asked her whether she wanted to go in and have a drink.

"That's what I have been doing all the time when I was alone. Or with my business acquaintances. No." She shook her head with that determined shrug which he liked so much. "I want you to take me to the places where you would take your French girl friends."

They walked through the rue de la Paix, across the Place de l'Opéra, which was a confusing *mêlé* of people, busses, automobiles. In front of the Printemps department store long tables stood on the sidewalk, heaped high with merchandise. The Saturday night shoppers, office girls, women with their husbands, children, were crowding the sidewalks.

Britta had slung her arm through his. They didn't talk. The bright lights, the loud voices, the shoving, pushing, shouting

people—it all added up to creating an illusion of complete intimacy. They were together, part of the crowd, yet alone. They felt stimulated by the presence of all the people, yet irresponsible at the thought of being wholly anonymous. Nobody knew them; the faces of the people were gliding by like telegraph poles during a railway journey; they were inside the compartment, just the two of them, holding hands, being happy because they were together.

They had drinks on the terrace of a nondescript café and went to the *rôtisserie* where Kamin used to eat. Lucien, the waiter, greeted Kamin with a firm handshake, and shook hands with Britta after Kamin had duly introduced her. He spread a clean tablecloth on top of four or five layers of used ones, brought clean plates, forks and knives, and napkins which smelled of chloride and were flimsy from frequent washings. Britta wanted to order roast beef but Lucien talked her out of it. He couldn't recommend the tripe *à la mode de Caen* either—"they're really warmed up remains from the *déjeuner*"—but the *noix de veau* was *délicieux*, freshly made and just right—Lucien formed a little circle out of thumb and index finger and kissed them—and he could get them an extra piece.

"All right, then," said Kamin. "The *noix de veau* it is."

The waiter shuffled away, giving the couple an affectionate look.

"You've won him over fast," Kamin said. "Lucien is slow to catch on with foreigners. It took me two months until he accepted me as a *habitué* and brought me linen napkins. Ordinary guests get only paper napkins."

The food was good though served with considerably less pomp and circumstance than at the Ritz. When Lucien took away a plate, he always placed the used fork and knife back on the table.

"Maybe we should have gone to the Ritz after all," Kamin said.

"Don't be silly," she said, and wiped her plate clean with a piece of bread.

He paid the check and they shook hands with Lucien who wished Monsieur, Madame a lot of *plaisir*. Outside, the cabarets

and cafés began to get ready for the Saturday night rush. A few girls stood in the doorway to a small hotel, addressing male passers-by. Kamin pointed across the street. "That is where I live."

"I want to see it."

He shook his head. "I don't know whether the bed is made yet."

"Now? At nine o'clock?"

"Saturday is a bad day for the *patronne*. Too many transients."

"Transients?"

"You look like a tourist who comes to Montmartre on a guided tour with Thomas Cook & Son. They go only into the well-aired, dusted-off places where everything's prepared, even the tips."

Kamin explained that every hotel on Montmartre had a number of rooms set aside for the practitioners of love on an hourly basis. "The steady roomers, who rent by the month, just pay the taxes and the overhead. The transients are so much gravy." He kissed her eyes. People walked by but no one paid any attention. "You still want to see my room?"

She grinned. "I hope they'll think we are transients."

When he opened the door, the bell rang. Through the glass door leading to the *patron's* dining-and-living room, he saw the *patron* and his wife having dinner. There was the smell of onion soup, as every night. The *patronne* looked up and smiled at him and when she saw Britta, she made it a point to look away so fast that Kamin knew she would run to the door and look after them. The *patronne* always took a sort of maternal interest in the affairs of her clients.

As Kamin walked up the winding stairway behind Britta, a tall woman in a muskrat coat came down, followed by a man. They looked bathed, brushed, dressed-up and left a trail of perfume. The man, by way of stepping aside, opened the door to the toilet, which was located between the floors, and stood there until Britta and Kamin had passed. Kamin said "*Merci*" and the man lifted his hat and said, "*Pas de quoi, Monsieur.*"

"Who was that?" Britta whispered at the landing. "Transients?"

"No. Madame Lafarge is a singing teacher. Her husband works in the Grands Galleries Duhanel as floorwalker. They are very quiet people and go out only on Saturday night."

The pseudo-elegant, deep-red rug ceased on the second floor and afterwards came bare wooden steps. There were no transient rooms beyond the second floor.

"Here we are," said Kamin. He opened the door. The bed was all made. Britta stepped into the room.

"It's nice," she said, sitting down on the bed. "I like it. It's small but lived in. And the flowers. From a girl?"

He nodded.

She said, "I see," as though she hadn't expected anything else.

"You want to take off your jacket?"

"No, dear. We'll be going right away. I just—I wanted to see where you live. Your new manuscript?" She pointed to a pile of typewritten sheets.

He nodded. From outside came the muted sounds of trolley cars, automobile horns and the music from the merry-go-round on the Boulevard de Clichy. She was here in his room, sitting next to him on his bed, and he was happy. There was nothing else on earth he wanted than that she would never leave.

He kissed her hair and her eyes. Her fingers were on his cheeks. "Darling," she said, "let's go down again. Don't forget, we are transients."

He wanted to kiss her but she turned her head and it was her kiss which he felt on his cheek.

"Now I did smear lipstick on your face," she said. She took out a piece of tissue and wiped his cheek and got up. They went down the stairway. The stairs were high and he walked down first and was holding her by the arm.

Downstairs, the *patronne* was watching behind the glass door. The bell rang again as they left. Turning around, Kamin could see the *patronne's* astonished face.



Saturday night was always bad for the regulars at the Bar des Artistes. Their right of privacy was invaded by loud, obnoxious trespassers who were "making the spots," and, according to the regulars, had no right being there. Marcel hated those nights and Monsieur Roget agreed with him, but Madame Roget pointed out, not without a certain grimness, that Saturdays were the only nights when the Bar was making money. She would sit behind the cash register, keeping a sharp eye on the customers so that no one would get away with more drinks than he had paid for or sneak out without paying. She checked the number of drinks on a small scrap of paper next to the cash register, wetting the pencil with her tongue.

After midnight, when Britta and Kamin came in, the crowd had thinned out a little. A few musicians came over during their intermissions for a *demie* and one of Madame Roget's invisible-ham sandwiches. M. Brasseur, the policeman, stepped in for a quick one which meant two or three quick ones, talking to M. Roget at the innermost corner of the zinc counter. Madame saw Britta first and signaled the new arrival to Marcel. Marcel came over and shook hands with Kamin.

"Any friend of M. Kamin is a friend of the management," he said and wiped his hands on his blue apron. "*Enchanté, Madame.*" He shook hands with Britta, who was also being introduced to M. Roget, Madame Roget, M. Brasseur, and *le bébé*, who had appeared with two prospective customers of Madame Soulanges' *maison*. Marcel made a great show, juggling the bottle from under the counter, throwing it from one hand into the other, pouring the drinks and throwing the bottle back under the counter. Britta was fascinated by his tattooed upper arms and his ocean-blue eyes.

"He doesn't look like a Frenchman," she said in French to Kamin.

"Madame, I am *un véritable Viking*," Marcel said. "Here's to you! This one is on the house."

"There's no reason why Marcel should offer free drinks to an Englishwoman," said M. Brasseur to M. Roget, sipping his free drink.

"Englishmen are good clients unless they get too drunk," said

le bébé. "Madame Soulanges doesn't encourage drinking with Englishmen."

A slim, distinguished-looking woman came in and *le bébé* greeted her affectionately. She had on a simple, expensive evening gown and a fur cape. She was with a gray-haired gentleman who wore a carnation in the buttonhole of his overcoat and looked like a member of the Cabinet.

"*Bon soir, Messieurs et Dames*," she said. Everybody said "*Bon soir*," except M. Brasseur who saluted in police style, raising two fingers to his right temple.

"Who is she?" asked Britta. "An actress?"

"Sort of," said Kamin. Laurette was a prominent *pensionnaire* at Madame Soulanges' establishment. *Le bébé* used to say that Laurette was more of a lady with all her clothes off than most society women were with their clothes on. It was rumored that *le bébé* was in love with Laurette and planned to marry her after Madame Soulanges' retirement. She had what he called distinction. Even her friends were distinguished. The one tonight was the director of a prominent fashion house on the Faubourg St. Honoré and he got Laurette all those expensive dresses.

Fernande came in a few minutes later. She was still wearing her stage make-up and kissed Marcel.

"We have a visitor from the other side of the Channel," he said. "How do you like that girl with Kamin?"

Fernande took in the situation in one moment. "He's in love with her. Passionately."

Marcel didn't like Fernande's snap judgments but experience had taught him to respect her feminine intuition. "You know everything, do you?" he said.

"Take one quick look at them. I've never seen Kamin like that. Who is she, anyway?"

"She just came in. She likes my eyes."

"Who wouldn't, *chéri*?" Fernande said sweetly. "Did she slip you a little *billet* inviting you to her room?"

"What if she did?"

"No, she wouldn't. Not that one."

"You think she's in love with Kamin?"

"I hope she is. I like Kamin," she said.

"Everybody likes Kamin," said Marcel, wringing out a wet towel and hanging it up in the rear of the counter.

She shrugged. "I can't make out those English women. I've seen them at the Folies. They always come in twos and threes, like the Italian *carabinieri*. They come in very dignified but just give them a couple of drinks. *Bon Dieu!* And they don't really enjoy it. I think they are actually afraid of having fun. That's why they have to have it so fast."

"I wouldn't know," Marcel said. She looked at him and they both broke into laughter. It was no secret that Marcel had had a few *amies* from "the other side of the Channel," but that was water under the bridge.

"We have a little English dancer in the Folies. Very unhappy but she wouldn't tell me," Fernande said. "English girls never talk. American girls talk too much."

Marcel looked at Britta. "She's got a good figure," he admitted.

"How would you know? You haven't seen her legs."

"You can sort of feel those things," Marcel said.

"Why don't you walk over and take a good look?"

"Look, Fernande, I was merely talking from the artistic point of view."

"Artistic, *ça alors!*" she said, and turned around on her high heels.

"I've always wanted a girl like that for Madame Soulanges' establishment," said *le bébé* wistfully. "An English girl and perhaps an American one."

"For the English and American customers?"

"On the contrary. The English and Americans prefer the French girls. But our French clients would be intrigued by her. You are intrigued yourself."

"I am a cosmopolite," said Marcel with dignity.

"Her skin is extraordinary," *le bébé* said. "I like women with beautiful skin." He pulled up his coat collar. "Well, I'd better be going."

The Boulevard des Capucines looked grayish and tired in the early morning, a no-longer-young woman whose wrinkles

begin to show in the pitiless light of the dawn. At the corner of the rue du Quatre Septembre, under the light of a street lamp, Kamin took Britta into his arms. When he thought of it later, going over every moment, time and again, he wasn't quite sure what had made him kiss her, right there under the street lamp. Perhaps it was something she had said, or the way she had turned her head aside; it didn't matter. The air was a stale mixture of exhaust gas, dust and the smell of bilge water. There were withered leaves on the ground. An old woman staggered down the Boulevard, spitting and muttering. Near the Madeleine the street cleaners were sweeping paper refuse, dirt, apple peels into the gutter. He looked at her and there was nothing else that mattered except to kiss her right away.

"Wait, dear," she said. "Let me wipe off my lipstick."

"I don't mind."

"Men look foolish with lipstick smeared all over their faces."

Her coolness infuriated him. He took her and kissed her. He had not expected her to pretend resistance but he was overwhelmed by her abandon. Her lips were soft and open and very warm. Once or twice she made little noises in her throat, like saying something in her sleep.

"Oh, dear," she said, and drew a deep breath. She shook her head three or four times. Her body was still close to his but she bent away her head and shoulders.

The street cleaners from the Madeleine were approaching in T-formation, sweeping and brushing.

"We didn't pick a very romantic spot," he said.

"It's always romantic when it is the right thing."

"Is it the right thing?" He kissed her again. She looked away.

"Darling," she said. "Please don't ask. Don't talk. Talk spoils everything."

The phalanx of the street cleaners was approaching. Time was running out fast.

"I *must* talk," he said. "In six hours you will be gone."

She looked at her wrist watch. "Five and three quarter hours."

"I can't let you go—like the last time. I'm in love with you. I won't let you go."

She sighed. "I asked you not to talk."

"You can't run out on yourself, Britta. You can't just leave and pretend it was nothing."

"Please, dear. Give me time. You know I have to go back. I have my job there."

"Send them a wire. Call them up. You can stay for another week." She shook her head, her lips firmly pressed together.

"At least for another day," he said.

He took her and kissed her hard but she broke out of his embrace. "No, no, no, no." She pushed her hair out of her face.

"Darling," she said. "It wouldn't be the way we both want it."

He didn't answer but he knew she was right.

"Give me a little time, dear," she said. "I'll try to come back next month."

"Promise?"

Instead of answering, she kissed him. She kissed him once more and walked quickly away.

He stood there, staring after her. She didn't look back which made it easier for both of them. Something cold and foul hit his ankle. The street cleaners had almost caught up with him. He remembered that he didn't even have a picture of her but she had already vanished in the darkness.



EVERYBODY agreed that the farewell party which Mr. Overstreet was throwing at the Bar des Artistes was *un succès fou*. He had invited all his old and new friends, the members of the Roget family, Kamin, *le bébé*, M. Brasseur, the policeman, sev-

eral musicians and Monsieur and Madame Lafarge of the Grand Galleries Duhanel. Nothing but very expensive Piper Heidsieck, Brut Extra, was being served. Madame Roget found it difficult to keep track of the bottles. Everybody was pleasantly intoxicated except Mr. Overstreet who was drunk.

Le bébé carried on an argument with Kamin about his favorite subject, Why Should Anybody Want To Go To America?

"I wouldn't go there if they give me a financial interest in a Park Avenue brothel," *le bébé* said.

"There are no brothels on Park Avenue," Mr. Overstreet said sadly, letting his hand flop down in front of his face.

"*Vive l'Amériquel*" shouted Monsieur Roget. "*Vive le Président Roosevelt.*"

"Don't spoil the party," said Mr. Overstreet, sharply. One of the musicians came over and said he wanted to shake hands with an American.

"I was in the *grande guerre* with the Americans," he said. "Château-Thierry." He filled himself a glass of champagne, drank it, smacked his lips and said, "*Des soldats formidables, les Américains.*"

"*Vive la France!*" shouted Monsieur Roget.

"Don't make so much noise," said his wife. "Remember, you are the *patron* here."

"*Je m'en fous pas mal du patron.*"

Mr. Overstreet invited all present to drop in at his place in Westchester. He said they were always at home on Sundays. "You must come too," he said to Kamin. "I want you to meet Jim Sherwood and the rest of the gang."

"*Qu'il est gentil,*" said Fernande. She was sitting on Marcel's lap, her arm around his shoulder.

Marcel agreed. "Those Americans—they're funny people. Takes you long to really get to know them. Then you find out that they aren't so bad."

The party broke off around two in the morning. Mr. Overstreet passed out his business cards, Harry W. Overstreet Associates, Rockefeller Plaza.

"*C'est un type généreux,*" said M. Brasseur, the policeman,

expressing the general sentiment. "I don't mind foreigners as long as they spend so much money."

Mr. Overstreet gave Madame Roget and Fernande each a brand-new one-hundred-dollar bill. "Keep it as souvenirs," he said. Fernande kissed him and Madame Roget started to cry. Everybody kissed everybody good-bye. Monsieur Roget stroked his mustache which he did always in moments of emotional strain.

Marcel began to whistle for a taxi but Mr. Overstreet said, *merci*, he would rather walk up the Rue Pigalle and take a taxi up there.

By the time Mr. Overstreet was on the street, almost everybody was crying. Mr. Overstreet was red in the face, and swaying slightly. Kamin had to support him.

"You're sure you want to walk?"

"Of course, my boy. I'm fine. I'm fine."

Kamin took Mr. Overstreet's arm. *Le bébé* and M. Brasseur walked behind them. A group of noisy men came down the street. *Le bébé* seized the opportunity.

"Will you beautiful girls?" he asked the men. M. Brasseur stepped discreetly aside.

The men shouted, "*Ta gueule!*" and one threatened to push in *le bébé's* wisdom teeth.

"*Dieu d'un dieu,*" said the policeman. "You must be really drunk. Talking English to Frenchmen!"

At the entrance to the dark side street leading to the establishment of Madame Soulanges, Mr. Overstreet made a hoarse sound in his throat, opened his mouth and fell flat on his face. He lay quite still.

"*Mon Dieu,*" cried *le bébé*. "Is he dead?"

"I don't think so," said M. Brasseur. He pushed his blue uniform cape over one shoulder and bent down. "Probably just passed out."

A group of people collected. Kamin suggested that they carry Mr. Overstreet back to the Bar des Artistes.

"Too far," said *le bébé*.

"Let me see," a man said and bent down. "I was in the med-

ical corps in the war. *Oh, là, là!* I think he's having some heart trouble."

"He said nothing about high blood pressure," said Kamin.

M. Brasseur asserted his official authority. He straightened up, swung his stick and pointed into the side street. "Let's take him to the *maison*."

They lifted the body of Mr. Overstreet. The policeman walked ahead and rang the bell of Madame Soulanges' house. "All right, disperse," he said to the passers-by.

A nude girl opened the door and gave a shrill scream as she saw the policeman. This started a general commotion in the large foyer that was a combination bar and parlor, with a large counter running on one side. A few late customers tried to get past the door and three girls stood paralyzed.

"Nobody move!" shouted M. Brasseur. Then he remembered that this wasn't an official raid. "This man is sick. Come on, all of you. Give us a hand!"

"Laurette, go call Madame Soulanges," said *le bébé*.

Le bébé closed the entrance door. Together with Kamin and the girls he placed Mr. Overstreet on the zinc counter. The bartender wiped off a spot of spilled beer under Mr. Overstreet's head.

Madame Soulanges came out of her office which was at the foot of the stairway leading to the rooms on the second floor. She looked worried for a moment until she saw *le bébé*.

"Is he dead?" she said. "I hope you won't get us into trouble, *bébé*. If he's dead, throw him back into the street. I'm having enough worries already."

"He isn't dead," said M. Brasseur. "But he will be if you women keep on talking. We need a room for Monsieur, and get us a doctor."

"Everything's occupied," said Madame Soulanges. She was a plump, severe-looking, heavily corseted woman. She could have been a schoolteacher or a clubwoman.

"You have to get a room," said the *agent de police*. "Even if it means throwing out a client."

The girls stood around dumbfounded, staring at Tragedy that had entered the house in the person of Mr. Overstreet.

At that moment Mr. Overstreet half opened his eyelids, saw the naked *pensionnaires*, and fainted dead away again.

"It's been a heavy turnover tonight," said Madame. "We can't just throw them out while they're in the rooms."

"But this is an emergency, *ma chère Madame*," said the policeman, trying to be amiable.

"*Monsieur l'agent*," Madame said with great dignity.

"You have your professional ethics and I have mine. In this house a client has never been bothered while he—well, occupied a room. *It just isn't done*."

"How about that Austrian doctor?" Laurette suggested. She was really a beauty. Few women look as well without any clothes as in a very expensive French evening gown, but Laurette had a beautiful body, svelte and slim and perfectly feminine.

"Isn't she beautiful?" *le bébé* whispered to Kamin, pointing to Laurette with pride, like showing a customer a new automobile model.

"Yes," Kamin said, without enthusiasm.

"What's the matter with you? You sick?"

"Of course not," Kamin said angrily.

"If you aren't sick, then you must be in love. Of course," he nudged Kamin's elbow. "You are in love. I forgot. Excuse me."

"Shut up!" said Kamin.

"Where's the doctor?" asked M. Brasseur.

"He's gone up with Marcelle about an hour ago," said Laurette. "Always stays terribly long."

"Well, get him, *sapristi*," said M. Brasseur. "This man is an American. You want to get in trouble with the American Embassy?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" said Madame Soulanges. "Quick, get him, Laurette!"

"He's the house doctor," one of the girls said to Kamin. "Comes to examine us every Thursday."

The Austrian doctor was a wiry man with deep-set eyes and a long, jagged scar above his right eye. He came out, buttoning up his coat and carrying his *Lodenmantel*, a grayish, practically indestructible raincoat.

Ach, what's the matter?" the doctor said. He had a habit of beginning every sentence with "*ach*," an exclamation of physical or mental displeasure. He saw the policeman and grew pale. "*Ach*, I'm the *Hausarzt*," he said. "The house physician. I'm registered. I'm not illegal. Here is my *carte d'identité*."

M. Brasseur pointed at Mr. Overstreet who was still lying on the bar. The doctor opened Overstreet's shirt collar, took the pulse and looked into his pupils.

"*Ach*, get me some cognac," he said.

"Which one?" asked Madame Soulanges. "Ordinary one or the expensive v.o.?"

"Any kind," said Kamin. "He's an American. He'll pay you."

"*Ach Gott im Himmel*, an American," exclaimed the doctor. "How lucky he is. He can go to America."

"Will he die?" asked Madame Soulanges. "We don't want any mess in here, *docteur*."

"*Ach*, he will be all right," said the Doctor. "A few hours' rest is all he needs."

"He's a good doctor," said Laurette to *le bébé*. "You're always safe with him."

They carried Mr. Overstreet into the room that had been vacated by the doctor and Marcelle, and laid him down on the bed.

The doctor wrote out a prescription and gave it to Kamin. "*Ach*, you'll get it at the pharmacy near the Boulevard," he said. "Ten drops into half a glass of water. He'll be *kerngesund* tomorrow morning. He has high blood pressure. *Ach*, how lucky he is to be an American."

The doctor put on his overcoat and his Tiroler hat which had a little edelweiss flower behind the hatband. Kamin asked what he owed him.

The doctor raised both arms.

"*Ach*, I wouldn't take a centime from an American. I hope to go to America when I get my visa. Now let him sleep. Will you have a drink with me downstairs? I drink Calvados, cognac, Vouvray, Pernod, vodka, everything."

* * *

The doctor had been right. The next morning Mr. Overstreet felt rested and much better. "I'm sorry to have caused all that trouble," he said to Kamin.

Kamin laughed. "You always wanted to come to the place."

Madame Soulanges came into the room with the Austrian doctor. There was a little argument about the price of the room. Mr. Overstreet said he was going to pay the usual price but Madame shook her head.

"I couldn't charge you the usual price. The rooms are always rented together with one of our *pensionnaires*, everything included. We never had a case like yours. You can pay me half of the usual price."

Mr. Overstreet insisted on paying as though everything were included. He gave Madame Soulanges a new ten-dollar bill, as a souvenir.

"Remarkable woman," he said to Kamin, as they walked down the stairway. "That's the way to get ahead in business. No cheating, no chiseling. Reminds me of our Mrs. Crane, back home in Westchester. Mrs. Crane has a real-estate business and is on the school board. Looks exactly like Madame here."

The foyer was empty. The chairs were overturned and put on top of the tables. The smell of stale beer and smoke was lingering in the heavy velvet curtains. None of the *pensionnaires* was in sight.

In the glaring sunlight coming in through the open entrance the shabbiness of the place was painfully evident. A man in blue-white striped cotton trousers was mopping the floor under the tables. Mr. Overstreet couldn't help thinking of his quiet, clean, orderly home in Westchester. The rugs with a rose drawing, white satin draperies, a large fireplace, chintz-covered sofas, and a Victorian cabinet.

And the paintings. Mr. Overstreet was very fond of his paintings. One showed the coast with the rays of the setting sun reflected by the waves. There was a landscape, soft-rounded hills and large fields, under the rising sun. Each of Mr. Over-

street's paintings showed some aspect of the sun, either rising, or setting, or being half-obscured by storm clouds, or the rays falling through after a sudden hailstorm. Mr. Overstreet liked to sit and look at his paintings. They gave him a quiet sense of uplift.

As he hailed a taxi, Mr. Overstreet somewhat dimly remembered the image of three nude women but it wasn't a pleasant recollection altogether. He wished he were in his white-tiled bathroom back home right now. The Rue Pigalle looked sleepy and unshaven in the morning. Mr. Overstreet sat back in his taxi and watched the street move out of the mirror above the driver's head. He felt no regret for leaving Montmartre. He was glad to go back to the Ritz Hotel, Mrs. Overstreet and a set of clean underwear. He fingered his watch chain and discovered that he had lost his Phi Beta Kappa key, probably at the brothel.

12

FERNANDE used to say that there were three kinds of women. Group one looked upon life as a continuous drama, in which they were playing the noble, suffering heroine. The second group were the perennial optimists, who believed in fairy tales, Cinderella and Prince Charming. Fernande herself belonged to the third, smallest category who thought that life was sad or merry, and often without any ending at all, but always beautiful.

' She was a happy girl. She had been brought up in a convent and worked at the Folies Bergère, and she was well acquainted with the two extremes of the moral code. "At the Folies, a girl can learn almost as much as from the Bible," she would say to Marcel.

"Provided she keeps her eyes open and her legs closed," said Marcel.

"Shame on you, Marcell!" Fernande didn't like such talk. He patted her on the back and she kissed him. They were deeply in love and spent the night together whenever it could be conveniently arranged and Madame Roget wouldn't know about it. After Fernande had been with Marcel, she would go to the small Convent Church, in a dark, quaint street just below the Sacré Cœur, and light the right number of candles.

The abbé Gabriel, a kindly old man, knew about the arrangement. He would merely tell her not to make any mistakes in counting and light the right number of candles. The abbé used to say that God was an excellent mathematician, and that He was very strict about figures.

Fernande would think it over. "I think, Monsieur l'abbé, I forgot the night when Mr. Overstreet gave his farewell party." She went to the altar and lit two more candles.

* * *

It was quiet evening in the Bar des Artistes. Fernande came home early from the Folies. There were a few regulars. At a table in the rear she saw Kamin with a stranger.

Marcel kissed Fernande tenderly on her strawberry-red mouth and wiped the lipstick off his lips with his apron. "See that *type* over there with Kamin? Funny hair color—probably dyed it."

"Who is he?"

"Name is Louis something. They went to school together."

"What do they argue about?"

"He's here on his honeymoon," said Marcel. "Left his wife at the hotel. I guess he doesn't give a damn about his wife and wants to sleep with one of the *poules* of Madame Soulanges. Imagine! After being married only five days."

Marcel looked at Fernande to see the effect of this startling revelation but she didn't seem to be shocked.

"What's so strange about that, *chéri*? Lots of men on their honeymoon come to the Folies and want to sleep with one of our girls."

Fernande saw Kamin and his friend get up and come toward the counter. The stranger looked better standing up than seated. He was tall and though she wouldn't call him a handsome man, he was interesting. He had an odd walk. He seemed to have springs in his shoes.

"Hello, Kamin."

"*Comment ça va, Fernande?*" Kamin paid for the drinks, making no attempt to introduce the stranger who stood there, looking at her impertinently. Fernande turned her head away.

"Maybe we should stay here a little longer," he was saying to Kamin. "I'm in no hurry." Fernande couldn't place his accent.

"Let's go, Louis," Kamin was saying. Fernande noted that Kamin was nervous. She wondered whether the English girl had something to do with it. It was amazing how Kamin had changed in the past two months. He'd always been so quiet and sure of himself. She sighed imperceptibly. All men become fools when they are in love.

"Let's go," Kamin said, more urgently. "You still want to go to the other place."

Kamin wouldn't mention Madame Soulanges' *maison* when Fernande was listening. Those foreigners were bizarre. They didn't realize that a girl in Paris had been brought up with those things. Like going to school or going to confession.

"Don't you want to introduce me?" the stranger said.

Kamin seemed to hesitate. "Fernande, dear, this is M. Delinick——"

"Delinc," the stranger said.

"Delinc. Louis Delinc. A classmate of mine." She noted that Kamin had said classmate, not friend. He said, "Mademoiselle Roget is the daughter of the *patron*."

Louis took her hand. "I was beginning to think you didn't like me," he said.

"I don't even know you."

"I didn't know you but I liked you a lot, believe me."

"You are very kind, Monsieur," she murmured. Her first impression of curiosity was being replaced by resentment.

"Mademoiselle dances," said Kamin. He seemed to be glanc-

ing nervously at the other end of the bar where Marcel was serving drinks to the two customers. "Mademoiselle is an *attraction* at the Folies Bergère."

"How interesting!" said Louis. "I always wanted to meet a lady from the Folies."

"You know about dancing, Monsieur?"

"Dancing and dancers. Blondes, brunettes and natural red-heads." He grinned at her.

"Louis," Kamin said. "Mademoiselle is engaged to M. Marcel, over there."

Fernande began to understand Kamin's anxiety. Louis was trying to make a pass at her. She blushed under her make-up. No one had ever made a pass at her in the Bar des Artistes. It just wasn't done. She was the daughter of the *patron*, a member of a family that was respected all over the arrondissement. The clients of the Bar knew that there was no connection between a girl's morals and the fact that she happened to be earning a living as a dancer on the stage of the Folies Bergère. Only those bizarre foreigners could have such ideas.

Fernande slid down from her high stool behind the counter. She wanted to leave. If Marcel got suspicious, there might be hell to pay.

Louis came after her and took her arm. "You're not going to leave now?"

"Let's go, Louis," said Kamin. Fernande glanced nervously at Marcel. Another fight and it'll be three more months until we can get married, she thought.

"I'm sorry, Monsieur," she said, freeing her arm.

"Don't be a fool, Louis." Kamin's voice was tense and low.

"Is she another of your protégées?" asked Louis. "I don't think Britta would like that."

Kamin shrugged. "You'll never grow up. I'm sorry, Fernande. I'm terribly sorry."

"You don't have to apologize," said Louis, smiling charmingly. "She doesn't mind. In fact, she doesn't mind *at all*."

"Let go of me, Monsieur!" Fernande spoke very softly. She hoped Marcel wouldn't hear her.

"What's going on here?" asked Marcel. He came over toward

them, drying his hands on his blue apron, a fine figure of a man, smiling and husky.

"I was just talking to Kamin," Fernande said, but Louis interrupted her.

"I hear you're the happy man," he said jovially. He smiled at Marcel who stood there, waiting. "I'm sure you won't object to my taking out your fiancée? I've been told that Parisians are very broad-minded people."

"Why don't you call *le bébé*, Marcel?" suggested Fernande. "He'll take Monsieur over to that place. I think I'll go to my room now."

She turned around, but Louis stepped forward and seized her arm. Marcel stood there without moving a muscle.

"Take your hand off Mademoiselle," he said quietly. "And apologize."

"Come on," said Louis, jovially. "Don't be a bad sport, old man. What the hell, she is a Folies dancer and knows the facts of life, doesn't she?"

Afterwards, everything became noisy and very confused, and the Bar des Artistes seemed to be spinning around in a mad whirl, like on a merry-go-round. There was the noise of breaking wood and glass, and a crash, and somebody was thrown against one of the mirrors by the entrance. Fernande instinctively turned her back and closed her eyes. The noises continued, her mother's angry voice was yelling, and Fernande thought, Now we'll never get married. People were pushing and shoving, then Fernande heard M. Brasseur's whistle. Somebody had put his arms around her. She turned around and saw Kamin. He'd been standing beside her all the time.

"I'm sorry, Fernande. I wanted to get him out of here."

The place seemed a battlefield, with overturned chairs and tables, Madame Roget making shrill, whining noises, M. Roget standing in the entrance, and outside on the sidewalk a wild mêlée of men, Marcel, M. Brasseur, a few passers-by, all looking down at Louis, lying there.

"Never mind, Kamin. Perhaps that'll teach your friend a lesson."

Kamin shrugged. "Nothing will ever teach him."

"But why? What's the matter with him?"

"It's a long story," Kamin said. "Mostly that he never grew up."

"Never met the right girl?"

"That's one reason. Money was the other. He always had too much of it, without having to earn it."

"Nobody has too much money," said Fernande. Suddenly she started to laugh.

"Look," she said, pointing outside where M. Brasseur was trying to pick Louis up from the gutter. "That beautiful suit. All torn and full of dirt. *Mon Dieu*, I'm sorry."

"He's got a lot of other suits," said Kamin.

"I'm not sorry about the suit. I'm sorry for his wife. He is here on his honeymoon, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Why did she marry him? Why would anybody marry him?"

"You won't believe it, Fernande," Kamin said. "She loves him."

* * *

Mr. Overstreet came over the following year, as he had promised his friends at the Bar des Artistes. For the first time since he was married, he came to Europe alone, depositing Mrs. Overstreet at their summer place on Cape Cod. He felt quite guilty about it and tried to make up by sending his wife frequent cablegrams and buying her expensive presents, but after six weeks in London and on the Continent he was glad that he'd left her back in America.

The Continent had become one big lunatic asylum. People were running around in circles, as if they had lost their sense of direction. Even at the Bar des Artistes things were quite different this year. The newspapers came out every hour with new rumors. Everybody was discussing politics, cursing the government, the Jews, the Czechoslovaks. Few people seemed to curse the Germans; they were afraid of them. M. Daladier had gone to Munich, and everybody was praying for peace.

M. Brasseur, the policeman, said that he was going to break the neck of every dirty foreigner whom he was going to meet

on his nightly beat. There was talk that Marcel might be called into the Army any day now.

"I'll never permit it!" Fernande cried. "Never, never, never! I won't let you go, dear!" They had been married hardly two months ago. It had taken that long for Marcel to pay off the damages caused in his recent fights.

"What business of ours is Czechoslovakia?" Fernande said. "I won't let you go die for people I've never seen in my life."

"She is right," said M. Brasseur.

"*Je m'en fous de la Tchécoslovaquie,*" said Madame Roget.

"France must stick to her obligations or some day she will have to pay for that," Marcel said. "If we sell out the Czechs now, others will sell us out later."

"*Merde,*" *le bébé* said. Business at the *maison* had fallen off and Madame Soulanges was considering closing the place.

"We want to live with ourselves," Marcel said stubbornly. "We've got to stick to our word of honor."

"I don't care about France's word of honor if you have to die," Fernande sobbed. "I want to *live* with you, *chéri*."

"You want to be ashamed when we get up in the morning and at night when we go to bed? Ashamed to meet other people on the street? To open a paper and read it?"

"Serves you right, Fernande," said Madame Roget. "I always told you that Marcel wasn't a husband for you. He just craves to get into the war. An adventurer—just like his father."

"I hope you will keep those foreigners out of your place," M. Brasseur said to M. Roget, with unmistakable emphasis. "That goes for Kamin and all of them."

It wasn't easy for Monsieur Roget to explain his position to Kamin. "It's very unfortunate, Monsieur Kamin. But there is a lot of hostile sentiment in the *quartier*. Not that I would personally share such views. After all, I've always been known as a patron of the arts and letters."

There had been an embarrassed silence after this speech. Then Marcel came up from behind his counter. "*Je m'en fous du sentiment du quartier,*" he said, wiping his hands with great deliberation. "*Je vous emmerde, Messieurs et Mesdames.*" He

demonstratively grasped Kamin's hand and shook it a long time.

Madame Roget gave an audible gasp.

"As far as I am concerned, you will always be welcome here, *mon vieux*," Marcel said.

"I've got a good mind to wring his neck," M. Brasseur whispered to M. Roget.

Monsieur Roget didn't answer. The price of eggs and poultry was going up. If this should go on, he would be making a nice profit on his little investment near the Porte d'Italie, by the end of next year. Of course there was the Boche—but they would never get to his little piece of land, on the outskirts of the city. Thank God, one had the Maginot Line.



It had been a lucky break for Kamin, but as he thought of it later, it was really a miracle. An American publisher bought the rights to Kamin's book. The American Consul in Paris granted him his visa and Mr. Overstreet helped him to get a berth on the *Île de France*. Six days later Kamin went aboard with Mr. Overstreet and two-thousand-odd passengers, none of whom felt any regrets at seeing the coast of Europe recede in the bluish mist.

When the boat docked in Southampton, Kamin went ashore and called up Britta's number in London. A gruff woman's voice told him that Britta had suddenly left town. She had gone to live with an elderly relative in Liverpool. The gruff voice gave him a telephone number and hung up on him.

It wasn't easy to get through to Liverpool. He was almost ready to give up when he heard her voice.

"Britta, darling. It's wonderful to hear you again." He was so excited that he forgot to give his name.

"But who is it?" she said cautiously. It was as if a door had been opened and he was standing in a cold draft. He had expected that she would recognize his voice among millions.

"It's Kamin. I'm in Southampton, on my way to America."

"Good Lord," she said, and then he heard her draw in her

breath sharply. What a fool he had been! He should have known that everything would be over after she had gone back to England. She had written to him a few times in the beginning, in the weeks following their last night in Paris. Later, the letters had become infrequent and then they stopped altogether though he was still writing her every week. People always forget; time and distance become stronger than memories. There was nothing else to be said—nothing but the stupid words which people keep saying to fill pauses between their thoughts.

"I had to hear your voice once more before going away, Britta."

"You are sweet," she said, but he knew that she didn't mean it.

There was a pause. There were too many pauses.

"I didn't know you had moved to Liverpool."

"Didn't I write you about it? My aunt here wanted me to live with her. It's a big house."

"I wanted to visit you in London," he was saying. It was like running against an invisible tide but you weren't strong enough and the tide was going to engulf you. "I tried everything but they wouldn't give me my visa."

"I'm glad you can go to America. I know you always wanted to go there."

He thought, why do we have to talk about America when our private world is at stake?

"Give Carol and Jeff my love. Some day I may come there too—if things will ever get back to normal again."

"I will, dear."

There was another pause and then he heard her take a deep breath. He knew that this was going to be the pay-off. He knew even before she told him.

"Kamin, dear, I'm going to be married. Don't say anything, dear. *Please*, don't." She was talking fast now, as if she were afraid to stop. If she stopped now, she wouldn't be able to go on again. "I'll be married later this month. It came so suddenly. I didn't know how to write you—how to explain it. I'm not sure even now that I can explain it."

Her voice broke off and she said, "Are you there? Are you listening?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm listening." His larynx was still working. He didn't drop the receiver.

"He asked me a few weeks ago. Oliver, I mean. I've known him for many years, but now he's been called into the service." She stopped and said, "I'm not making myself very clear, am I?"

"Of course," he said. "Everything is very clear."

You stand there and say, "Everything is very clear," with no specific inflection in your voice while your private world crumbles and goes up in rubble.

"Have a good trip and God bless you."

She hung up on him without waiting for his answer but there was nothing to say. There was absolutely nothing else to be said.

He stepped out of the booth and then he had the feeling that something was wrong with his knees. He turned around and saw Louis, standing next to the baggage counter of the pier.

13

LOUIS had only a small room on B-deck, but as soon as he came aboard the *Île de France*, he talked the purser into letting him have an outside room on the Promenade deck. It had a double bed of brass instead of the customary bunk and two large windows instead of a porthole.

"How did you get this luxurious place?" Kamin asked. He had to share an inside stateroom and that had been difficult enough to get.

"I gave the purser a little story. Told him I am a friend of a board member of the French Line. I happened to meet a fellow

in Paris. He gave me his card." Louis snapped his fingers. "It's so easy if you know how."

Everything was easy if you knew how. Your marriage doesn't work out, so you get yourself a divorce, leave your wife back home and go to America. As easy as that.

"Just the same, you should have taken Trudy away," Kamin said. "Things aren't so good there, you know."

Louis shrugged. He had a way of shrugging off all unpleasant matters. You moved your shoulders and everything that was bothering you fell off.

"They are all in good shape," he said.

"The only one in good shape is my poor Uncle Jaques," Kamin said. "He died last year." Uncle Jaques' timing had always been perfect. He knew when to walk out of a bad business so he wouldn't get caught in the bankruptcy.

"Trudy didn't want to come," Louis said. "She said somebody had to stay with her father."

"Matous? Is he staying?"

"You know Matous. A man in his position couldn't walk out as easily as you or I. He's got the Steel Works, his money, his house, his responsibilities. Matous *wanted* me to go. He's got a little money tucked away in Switzerland and America. Wants me to take care of his investments until he can come over with Trudy. In a few months, I guess. Smart fellow. He took a business trip to Switzerland twice a year. I always wondered whether he had a woman in Zurich or his banker." He chuckled. "He had both. Which reminds me, you'll have to lend me some money."

"I thought you had——"

"It's all in New York. And I need some for the trip."

"Didn't you bring anything with you?"

"My father wouldn't let me. The regulations were stiff and he was worried about my taking out money illegally."

That was a slight deviation from the facts. Louis had asked his father for money, but the old man had turned him down.

Louis hadn't changed much in all those years. The tombstone color of his eyes had become more washed out. He had grown thinner and the lines in his face seemed slightly deep-

ened. Two new lines were running down past the corners of his mouth. They made him look sharper and harder.

His luggage was spread out on two chairs. He had only two medium-sized suitcases but they made up in sheer elegance for the usual array of large trunks, overnight bags, hat bags. His suitcases were of white pigskin leather, custom-made, with a small gold monogram in the lower right corner. The intertwined letters said L.D.-M.

"What does L.D.-M. stand for?" Kamin asked.

"Louis Delinc-Matous. Hyphen in between."

The hyphen is a new one, Kamin thought. Nobody in their home town and very few people in the country happened to have a hyphenated name.

"What does it matter? It doesn't hurt anybody." Louis was looking for a necktie. All the drawers were open. Kamin saw two Shantung silk pajamas, half a dozen Oxford shirts, two pairs of new London shoes, and a tuxedo. There was also a gray double-breasted flannel suit, and across the bed a camel's-hair coat.

"That all you have?" Kamin asked.

"I prefer to get everything new in America. Those old things are give-aways. They mark you. It's bad to be marked." He lowered his voice as though he were confiding a great secret to Kamin.

"How do you know?" Kamin asked. "Have you ever been in America?"

Louis ignored the question. "And another thing you ought to remember: Never try to sell yourself. Always make them buy from you. That puts you in the stronger bargaining position."

It sounded like something Louis had picked up in a book, *How to Conquer America in Five Easy Lessons*, or listening to people on the terrace of the Café de la Paix in Paris, but somehow he managed to put sincerity into his remarks. Kamin listened in amazement.

"When I used to appear before court," Louis said, "I always found it much easier to impress the presiding judge and the D.A. than the little people in the jury. The smart guys are easy to sell. Their minds are drugged by legalistic squibbling. It's

the little, unimportant people that are really tough to deal with. They've got too much of that damned common sense. Beware of the little people, Kamin. Go after the big snobs, the rich suckers. If you do it right, you'll get away with murder. And they will love you for it."

* * *

The crew members aboard the *Île de France* agreed that there had never been a trip like this one, although some of the bartenders, table waiters, cabin stewards, musicians and *marins* had been working for "the company" for ten and twelve years.

The crew members were a mixed lot who took a placid view of world affairs as long as they didn't affect their well-being and the size of their tips. Things had been fairly normal on the eastbound trip, when some Americans had got drunk even before the bars opened officially—there was no door that the sesame of a dollar bill wouldn't open—and there would always be customers for the raffles at the barber shop, after closing hours, which would net the barber, the deck steward and two cabin stewards a few extra thousand francs.

But the westbound voyage was thoroughly alarming. People seemed to drink more, in a fast, hectic way. The passengers took a new, disturbing interest in the ship's daily newspaper that hitherto had been thoroughly ignored. *Le Journal Transatlantique* had four pages. It was delivered to the first-class passengers in their staterooms every morning. The tourist-class pariahs had to pick it up from the piano at the salon. The third-class travelers were permitted to glance at it twenty-four hours later on their bulletin board.

Most of the space had been pre-printed in Paris; advertisements of apéritifs and champagnes *de marque*, French summer resorts, hotels, the Café de la Paix, Savon Cadum, Eau de Vichy, Radio City Music Hall, *Visitez la Côte d'Azur*. There were four narrow columns left blank which were filled by M. de Laborde, the third *télégraphie sans fil* engineer, who as a sideline edited the paper, the stock-market prices, weather reports, mileage for the past twenty-four hours, the ship's position at noon, announcements of raffles and tournaments,

"clocks will be set back thirty minutes at midnight," the concert program. When M. de Laborde didn't catch enough news on the radio, he would fill in various bits of information: King Solomon's long-vanished seaport at the northern end of the eastern arm of the Red Sea has been found buried under sands near Aquaba. Queen Mary was seen without her customary umbrella at the opening of the Kensington Gardens flower exposition. New anti-Jewish decrees in Austria caused a wave of suicides. The British tea clipper *Thermopylae* sailed in 1854 from Liverpool, England, to Melbourne, Australia, in sixty-three days, eighteen hours, fifteen minutes.

M. de Laborde hastened to finish the day's edition of the paper because he had a date with Mrs. Carter from Philadelphia, a racy redhead, who had a double stateroom on the Promenade deck with her daughter Lackawanna, aged five. Mrs. Carter was always ready to hop into bed with you provided there was somebody to take care of Lackawanna in the meantime. M. de Laborde was tickled that she had passed over the second radio engineer and was having a date with him, the third radio engineer.

M. de Laborde took another look at the radiograms but there was nothing of importance. He was thinking about the new house he was going to build back home. M. de Laborde came from Normandy, where his family had lived for four centuries in the town of St.-Lô.

14

LOUIS was an instant hit with Mr. Overstreet when Kamin introduced him, in the bar of the *Île de France*.

"I'm delighted to meet you," Louis said, shaking Mr. Overstreet's hand. "I've heard so much about you."

Mr. Overstreet was pleased. "From your friend Kamin, I suppose?"

"No. A friend of mine from New York. A Mr. Johnston. J. B. Johnston. One of the vice-presidents of the Chase National Bank."

"Johnston?" said Mr. Overstreet. "Not George B. Johnston by any chance, 'Shorty' Johnston?"

"I don't exactly remember whether they called him Shorty," Louis said vaguely. "But I do remember that he spoke glowingly about the Harry W. Overstreet Associates."

Kamin wondered whether Louis had secretly snatched away one of Mr. Overstreet's business cards.

"It must be wonderful to be the master-mind in a business that is new and so typically American."

Mr. Overstreet ordered more drinks. He looked *very* pleased.

"You flatter me, Mr. . . ."

"Why don't you call me Louis?"

"Gladly, Louis. Name's Harry. I'm flattered, really. Though, in all modesty, I suppose everybody knows that we are the leaders in the Community Chest field," said Mr. Overstreet. "We've really invented the Joy of Giving." One could hear the capital letters in Mr. Overstreet's pronunciation. "We spiral them into a frenzy of giving."

"Tell us more about it." Louis was a great listener, when he wanted to be.

"We take care of the whole drive, for a flat fee, of course. Send out literature. Visit the local newspapers. . . ."

Mr. Overstreet was off on his standard speech. Louis listened in evident rapture.

"Above all, don't forget the women," Mr. Overstreet was saying. "The women of America control eighty per cent of the national wealth."

"Eighty-one," said Louis.

"What's that?" Mr. Overstreet was not used to being corrected.

"Eighty-one. I saw the latest statistics." Louis sipped his drink. "It's all very interesting—though not exactly new."

"What's that?"

"A couple of years ago," Louis was saying, seating himself more comfortably, "my office back home was put in charge of our country's great lottery drive. Same principle—on a much larger basis."

Kamin couldn't but marvel at this presence of spirit. There had never been a lottery in their country.

"Basically the idea was the same." Louis' voice sounded patronizing. He was now The Great Expert graciously giving a few pointers to Mr. Overstreet. He had caught the initiative. "Speeches by members of our government. An over-all newspaper campaign. Nothing but editorials. Front-page stuff. Then a special session of Parliament. Mass meetings in front of the country's great cathedrals."

Louis raised his hand. He sounded like a member of the College of Cardinals. "Some of our churches were built long before Columbus set foot on American soil."

Louis had hit home. Mr. Overstreet's jaw sagged. No use denying it; he was deeply impressed.

Kamin was speechless. It was absurd; he was impressed himself by Louis' fantastic tales. He was afraid that Mr. Overstreet might find out the truth but Mr. Overstreet seemed to enjoy this very much.

"You must meet Jim Sherwood," Mr. Overstreet said to Louis. "Jim's my associate Number One. Takes care of the business. Great mind. Between the two of you, I'm sure, you could cook up something terrific."

"I'd love to," said Louis. "But I'm afraid I'll be terribly busy when I get to New York. You see, I've so many things lined up."

Lined up, he had said. Terribly busy. Kamin wondered where Louis had snapped up those catch lines. The amazing thing was that Mr. Overstreet didn't break into laughter and leave but seemed to be deeply concerned about Louis' being terribly busy.

"I can imagine. But you simply must free yourself for a few hours. In our business, we always need people with fresh ideas."

‘Nothing like a blood transfusion,’ I keep saying to the boys. Yes, sir, it’s a great business and you would be just the man for it.”

He stood up. “Well, I’d better get dressed for dinner. See you later.” He signed the check and left.

“Great old fool,” said Louis, looking after the American.

“You’ve certainly established yourself as an expert with a capital ‘E,’” Kamin said. “What was that about the lottery drive you were dreaming up?”

Louis didn’t seem to listen. He was looking at Mrs. Carter, the sexy redhead who was coming in with M. de Laborde, the third engineer and Lackawanna. The little girl stared at Louis. Suddenly she stopped in front of him and gave him a Bronx cheer.

“Isn’t she cute?” said Mrs. Carter to the third engineer. “Don’t do that, Lackawanna.”

Mrs. Carter gave Louis a long stare out of the corner of her eyes. Louis smiled back at her.

Kamin got up. “You coming?”

“I think I’ll stay for a while,” said Louis. “Say, how much money you think this guy Jim’s making?”

“Jim?”

“The fellow Overstreet was talking about.”

“How should I know?” Kamin shrugged. “You haven’t got his job yet. Don’t worry about the salary.”

“I will, some day.”

“No doubt,” said Kamin. “Mass meetings in front of the country’s cathedrals. Lord, I’ve never heard such a preposterous story.”

“Of course it’s preposterous. A fairy tale, to be exact. Don’t you know that children of all ages always fall for fairy tales?”

* * *

Afterwards Kamin was non-existent as far as Louis and Mr. Overstreet were concerned. They spent the rest of the trip discussing giant new money-raising schemes that would “spiral” the people of the United States into a frenzy of giving. “Spiral” had been Mr. Overstreet’s favorite expression, and soon it be-

came Louis' favorite expression. Between spiraling stunts Louis ordered Mr. Overstreet's wines and champagne, "The Pomery 1920 is passable but if you like something really good, take the Bollinger Brut 1921," entertained Mr. Overstreet with tales from his fabulous past, "We were millionaires three times and broke four times. There wasn't a prominent actress in Europe I didn't sleep with," and gave the American a short chronicle of his family. "My people were *condottieres* in the sixteenth century, pilfering on a larger scale than your robber barons did a hundred years ago."



Louis gave his tie a last flippant pull that made it stand up in the right rakish angle, and put the red carnation into the buttonhole of his midnight-blue tuxedo. Too bad that Matous couldn't see him. Matous was allergic to red carnations because on May Day they were always worn by the Communists as Party insignia. Tomorrow Louis would go to the New York bank and get Matous' money. Life was full of irony.

Tomorrow they would arrive in New York. Some people were going to stay up all night. They didn't want to miss their first look at the skyline.

Louis decided not to get out of bed at dawn, no matter whether he was alone or with Mrs. Carter. The skyline could wait. Louis wasn't bewildered or frightened or excited like many of the other people. They seemed already lost on the winding road that led into a Fata Morgana of dollar signs. The dollar signs kept moving away as you ran after them. After a while you were tired, out of breath, and had to give up running.

Louis didn't worry about the Fata Morgana. He was on the eve of a new play that has been tried out successfully before it reaches Broadway. He was the star of the play. No matter how the play went, it was going to be a personal triumph for the star.

In those few days he had learned a lot about the Americans. They were naïve and generous. And so easy to handle. Europe's skepticism hadn't spread to America yet, thank God.

They still believed in the good of mankind. They believed what you told them, no matter how preposterous it was, provided you told it *right*. You came from one of the most famous families in a country with an operetta name; you were a terrific fellow who had put on shows in the Folies-Bergère, owned a South African gold mine, had a hand in the assassination of Rasputin, gave up your noble title for the sake of Democracy; you were a friend of G. B. Shaw, the Archduke of Angostura, the Duchess of Windsor and Pablo Picasso. The older and sillier the clichés, the more effective. One hundred and thirty-five million people. That was a lot of suckers, and over half of them were women. Women were always a great help.

Louis hoped they would not all be like Mrs. Carter. The Philadelphia redhead had been a disappointment. She seemed always to be watching herself: her toenails, her body, her emotions and her hairdo. And at the wrongest possible moment she would start wondering whether Lackawanna had been drinking her afternoon milk. She had been fun for a few moments but she was hardly a runner-up to the women Louis had met on his way.

Louis' thoughts went back to Marion Mara, who had become a great operetta diva in Germany. She was the first and the best woman he'd ever had. She had known all the nuances of lovemaking, from supersensitive delicacy to brutal animality.

There had been others, so many he didn't remember their names. For a short moment he thought of Britta who had made fun of him; and of Trudy of whom Louis had made fun. He would have to watch his step from now on. He couldn't afford to make a fool of himself like that night in the Bar des Artistes on Montmartre. The French were smart people; some were too smart to be fooled around with. That little girl with the silver eyes and the dark make-up; she had looked through him right away.

He didn't like to think of that "accident," and threw it overboard with the rest of his memories. Like the food remains which they were throwing out of the portholes after every meal.

You've got to be practical, Louis thought. He pulled up his black tie and walked quietly out of the room.

15

THE CUSTOMS OFFICER on Pier 84 looked into the pigskin suitcases with the bold-engraved letters L.D.-M.

"That all you got? No trunk?"

"There was no time to pack a trunk, officer," Louis said, with quiet dignity. The customs officer nodded in sympathy. Louis smiled, to thank him for his understanding. He had established contact with the man.

"Here is a letter that may interest you, officer," Louis said, modestly. "From my government. My former government, I should say."

The officer read the letter. He was a heavy-set, slow-spoken man, reminding Kamin of a London bobby. He seemed more dignified than customs officers in Europe who would sniff around your baggage like frustrated dachshunds.

The officer returned the letter. "Those dirty bastards," he said and shrugged, in a gesture of helpless sympathy. He put a chalk mark on Louis' suitcases and smiled. "Good luck, Mister."

"Nice fellow," said Kamin. "Remember our customs men? They weren't as easy as that."

"They were as naïve as that," said Louis.

"What's in the letter you have there?"

"My father had dinner with a third secretary at the Foreign Office. Afterward they both got drunk and the next day I had that letter. Come on, there's Overstreet."

Mr. Overstreet was arguing with a customs officer, who held a pad and a pencil in his hand.

"I told you I didn't know about the permissible maximum limit of perfume," Mr. Overstreet said.

"You got twice as much. You had to declare it," the man said.

A severe-looking woman at Mr. Overstreet's elbow wearing eyeglasses, a black costume and a small flower bed on her hat, said, "But it's a gift, officer. Doesn't that make any difference?"

"Gift or no gift, he had to declare them, Madam."

"Don't bother, Mabel," Mr. Overstreet was saying. "I don't mind paying the duty. It's the principle involved. As an American citizen I know my rights and——"

"Look, officer," a heavy-set, placid-looking man said, "can't we straighten this out, as one Irishman with the other?"

"Who is he?" the customs man asked Mr. Overstreet, as though the protocol obliged him to address everybody through Mr. Overstreet.

"I'm Jim Sherwood," the man said.

"You didn't declare it," the customs man said, stubbornly addressing only Mr. Overstreet. "Wanna step into the office with me, Mister?"

"One moment, officer," Louis said.

"Who's *he*?" The officer was getting visibly irritated.

"Don't bother, my boy," Overstreet said to Louis. "I don't mind the money. But I'm getting sick and tired of the system. Things get worse month after month. We are having more regimentation here than some people under European dictatorships."

"Here's my passport, officer," Louis said. "And here's a letter from my government. The truth is that most of the perfumes belong to me. I'm not a citizen of this country and I didn't think I was entitled to bring them with me. So I asked this gentleman"—Louis bowed politely toward Mr. Overstreet—"to help me."

"Citizen ain't got nothing to do with it," the customs man said. He took the letter and read it, rather against his will. Another officer joined him. He was the one that had marked Louis' and Kamin's luggage. "Any trouble, Mac?"

"This here guy claims that most of that stuff is his. You better open your baggage, Mister."

"He's okay," the second officer said. "I handled him myself."

The customs man folded the letter and handed it back to Louis. "Look, Mister," he said. "The next time don't get mixed up in that kind of monkey business. And as for you, Mister," he said to Mr. Overstreet, "better get acquainted with our customs regulations." The customs men left.

"I don't mind the money," Mr. Overstreet declared loudly. "Matter-of-fact, I'll send the money to one of our own charities. But I'll be damned if I give it to the Treasury and I'll be damned——"

"Harry!" said the bony woman.

Mr. Overstreet came back to earth again. He introduced the two men. "I told you about Louis, dear. This is our new bright hope. Jim, this is the fellow I've been talking about."

Mr. Overstreet turned toward Louis. "You certainly have a way with our customs officers." His voice betrayed admiration.

"That must have been a *very* important letter you showed him," Mrs. Overstreet said, carefully adjusting her glasses.

"Oh, just a few words from the prime minister," said Louis, with studied casualness.

"The prime minister?"

"An old friend," Louis explained nonchalantly. "I once did him a little favor."

"Let's get out of here," Jim Sherwood said. He had been watching Louis. "Piers and ships always depress me."

"What's the matter, Jim? I thought you'd had your vacation," said Mr. Overstreet.

"Yeah. The Catskills," Jim Sherwood sounded disgusted.

"How's Katherine?"

"Fine."

"The children?"

"Fine. For Crissake, let's get outa here."

"Yes," said Mr. Overstreet. "This argument made me thirsty, goddammit."

"Harry Overstreet!" His wife spoke up sharply. "I don't

know. He's always like that when he comes home. A changed man." She spoke to no one in particular.

"Why don't we all go to my place and have a drink?" said Louis.

Mrs. Overstreet nudged her husband. "The Copelands are waiting for us, Harry."

"*One* drink, Mrs. Overstreet?" Louis put his arm under hers and pressed her hand.

Mrs. Overstreet smiled reluctantly. "Well, where do we go?"

"To the Plaza. I'm staying there."

Jim Sherwood detached himself from the group. "I got to go back to the office. See you at the office tomorrow?" He turned toward Louis. "Eleven o'clock?"

"Certainly," said Louis. He remembered Kamin and looked around for him briefly, then gave up and the party started off.

16

THE OFFICES of the Harry W. Overstreet Associates were high up in Rockefeller Center. A tall auburn-haired secretary, whose breasts were pointed up forty-five degrees under her white satin blouse, let Louis into the private office of Jim Sherwood, an oak-paneled chamber which had once been a seventeenth-century conference room in a castle in the British Midlands. There was a sixteenth-century cabinet, the windows were fashioned in old style and built inside the windows of Rockefeller Center, and the chairs in front of Jim Sherwood's desk were about three hundred years old and very uncomfortable. The large desk was nine years old and came from the Manhattan Desk Company.

There were two big photographs on the desk, one of a pretty, dark-haired woman, the other showing the same woman and two little girls. Jim Sherwood was a great family man. When he

had a female visitor in his office after office hours, he would take great pains to explain to his secretary that the visitor was a second cousin of his wife's, or a relative from out of town.

Jim Sherwood looked his age, which was thirty-six. This pained him considerably. Like many men who have reached a good position in their early years, he felt that he didn't look old and dignified enough for his importance. Jim Sherwood's face was round and soft and busted in, like a sleepy bulldog's. As much as he tried to look dignified, he couldn't do anything with his eyes.

Jim's eyes gave him away. They were soft and dreamy, no matter how the light was reflected in them. His eyes had trapped innumerable people into the belief that Jim Sherwood was a soft touch. Sherwood was a sucker for sentimental songs, pretty women and old-friends-and-old-whiskey, but his softness was as soft as a skin-deep layer of moss on top of many layers of hard, cold granite. The road to Jim's success was littered with broken promises, broken friendships and broken people. Jim Sherwood was always a soft touch for Jim Sherwood and for nobody else. His enemies called him a son of a bitch. His friends said he was one hell of a nice son of a bitch.

He was on the phone as Louis was ushered into his office. His back was slouched into his reclining chair, his feet were on the desk and the telephone was propped up against his chin. He had a round chin and brown hair which looked reasonably nice when it was all wet and brushed back. But Sherwood could look sloppy even in a brand-new Brooks Brothers suit.

He kept talking into the phone in a soft, unhurried voice. He motioned Louis to sit down. Every now and then he would grunt into the phone, which could be taken by the party on the other end as an affirmative or negative utterance, and didn't commit Jim in any way. While he kept making grunting noises, he pushed a cigarette box with his foot toward the rim of the desk toward Louis, motioning for him to take one.

Louis was trying to appear relaxed, a difficult endeavor in his uncomfortable chair. He had never fallen for the world-wide public-relations campaign which has made America the busiest, most hurried country on earth, and New York the busiest, most

hurried city in the busiest, most hurried country on earth. There existed a fictitious notion of Americans as people always on the run, always catching planes, trains, automobiles, running after busses, shooting up and down in express elevators, making millions of dollars in feverish haste, always running, never walking, like the figures in the old silent newsreels.

Jim Sherwood emitted another series of grunting noises, whispered into the telephone and put the receiver back on the handle, which seemed to cause him considerable pain.

"Sorry," he said. He made his feet glide down from his desk and looked exhausted. He shook hands with Louis across the desk, hardly rising from his seat.

"Cigarette?" he said.

"Thanks. Care for one of mine? Egyptians." Louis brought out a package of Laurens Dimitrinos.

"Hmm," said Jim Sherwood. He took one and lighted it on his Dunhill lighter. Louis knew that the man was watching him through the exhaled smoke. He tried to think fast. Maybe Sherwood's lack of enthusiasm had something to do with Mr. Overstreet; maybe Overstreet and Sherwood were at odds about him.

"H. W. told me about you," Sherwood was saying. He put his feet back on the desk again and studied his creased pants. He seemed bored. "Don't know exactly where you'd fit in."

"We've discussed a few new ideas," Louis said. "I have organized quite a few drives in our country. On a much larger scale, backed by the government."

Jim Sherwood's eyes were on him, but he didn't seem to listen. He was daydreaming.

"H. W. has a tendency to oversimplify things," Jim said after a while. "There's a lot to be learned in this business. Usually we put a new man together with one of our experienced guys to teach him the ropes."

It was quiet again. Louis decided to gamble on a frontal attack. Never sell yourself. Make them want to buy you.

"I wouldn't be interested in a position that doesn't give me a real opportunity," he said. He couldn't help it that his voice had become more strained. "I've had a unique opportunity to

observe History in the Making, while I was on my assignments all over Europe."

Jim Sherwood didn't shift his eyes. He hadn't noticed the capital letters in Louis' speech—or perhaps he didn't want to.

"What kind of assignments?" he said. "H. W. didn't tell me about that."

"There's going to be a war," Louis said. Sherwood's bored face made him uncomfortable. "People will be eager to listen to a man who's been standing near the Milestones of History."

"I see," Sherwood said. "And that man—is you?" There was an unmistakable sound of irony in his voice. Louis made an effort not to look at him. His voice was getting high-pitched, as always when he was under a strain.

"There are people who sleep right through an earthquake. They don't know that somebody got murdered in the apartment below them. They learn about it the next day from their papers." He got up and paced the floor. "I didn't have to wait for the papers to read about the *Reichstagsbrand*. I was there that night. Matter of fact, I was in Vienna in those fateful February days in '34. I knew it. It was in the air."

"What was in the air?"

Louis shrugged. "That—that feeling of impending disaster. The tension preceding the electrical storm. Some people react to it like barometers. I remember the day in Marseille. You couldn't possibly know what was going to happen. But there was that electrifying feeling again."

Jim Sherwood kept smoking. Deadpan. "What happened in Marseille?"

"King Alexander of Yugoslavia was murdered. And Foreign Minister Barthou. I almost got caught in the mob when they lynched the murderer."

The telephone rang with an intruding, impertinent sound. Louis frowned. Jim Sherwood took the receiver. "Yeah . . . Yeah . . . Okay." He made another grunting sound and put the receiver down. "I don't quite get the connection. I don't see the tie-in with our fund-raising activities. The war angle may boomerang. Instead of inducing people to give more it may make them button up their pockets. Why don't you look around

town? Maybe you'll find a better opportunity someplace. You know you can always come back and talk to me."

Sherwood got up. "Trouble with H. W. is that sometimes he doesn't express himself too clearly. For one thing, he doesn't handle personnel problems around this place. I'm in charge of the office. I don't think that you would work out, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Delinc-Matous."

"Yeah. Not now, at any rate. Why don't you try us later again?" He went toward the door. "Tell you what you do. Some morning you give me a ring and we'll have lunch together."

So that was that. No denying that Americans had better manners than Europeans. In Europe they would have thrown you out without any luncheon invitation. Still, it was a straw to cling to. "What time should I call you?" Louis said. "Around ten in the morning?"

"A little later. Ten-thirty. Good-bye." Jim Sherwood didn't like calls between ten and ten-fifteen in the morning. At that time he read the Bible.

He had taken the Bible from a hotel room. He didn't really read in it, but would go over some of the spots that he'd red-penciled. It was like synopsisizing the Bible. After fifteen minutes of Bible exercises in the morning, Jim Sherwood felt cleansed and ready for the dog-eat-dog routine of his day.



Louis walked out of Sherwood's office. The dream was over. How to Conquer America in Five Easy Lessons. At the elevator he met Sherwood's secretary. He saw the outline of her breasts under her white satin blouse, and her tight skirt.

"How about having lunch with me?" he said.

She seemed to study him for a moment. "Thanks."

"Thanks yes, or thanks no?"

"Thanks yes."

By the time they had finished lunch in a little French place near-by, Louis knew that Jim Sherwood was making \$50,000 a

year, didn't get along well with Mr. Overstreet, was trying to wrest control of the business from him, had a house in Westchester, a pretty wife, two kids and two cars. Two years ago he had taken a trip to Europe. It had been strictly a business trip; the firm had been paying his expenses. This arrangement gave Sherwood a pretext to go without his wife. In Prague he had fallen violently in love with a Czech woman. He hadn't been the same person since.

"Before he went to Europe, he'd have plenty of dates," the secretary said. "Every other evening there would be another neighborhood hussy, and he would go into that routine of the out-of-town relative."

The secretary sipped her coffee thoughtfully. "When he came back, he would never go for lunch to the usual places, '21,' the St. Regis, the Gotham, the Oak Room. Instead he would eat all by himself at a little place on Second Avenue. Took me there once. Too much gravy and spices for me in the middle of the day! Poor Mrs. Sherwood doesn't know anything, of course. The wife is always the last one to know. Well, I ought to be going back. We aren't supposed to take more than an hour for lunch. . . . What? . . . No, I couldn't tonight I really couldn't. . . . But I'd be glad to sometime soon."

As easy as that, Louis thought when she'd gone. It's always easy when you meet the right people at the right moment in the right place.

He knew exactly what to do. He made a couple of telephone calls, discussed food with a surprised Czech cook on Second Avenue and ordered a few special dishes, full of gamy taste, sour-cream gravies and nostalgia. Then he called up Jim Sherwood and invited him for a genuine Czech meal.

* * *

"For dessert," the waiter said, "I recommend our *paláčky*."

"What's that?" said Jim Sherwood.

"Small pancakes," Louis was saying. "Filled with strawberry jam. Delicious. You must have eaten them at Piskaček's, when you were there with Vlasta."

"O, God Almighty," Sherwood groaned. "Don't remind me. Of course I remember. I couldn't eat them here. I could never eat them anywhere else. Thanks, Louis."

"The *palačinky* are made to order," the waiter insisted.

"No, I couldn't. What else have you got?"

"There's a cheese strudel," said the waiter, chasing away an imaginary fly from the checkered tablecloth.

"I'll have the cheese strudel," said Jim Sherwood.

There were small papier-mâché coasters under the beer glasses, and there was the smell of fresh rye bread. An assortment of European flags was fastened to the wall, arranged symmetrically around the Stars and Stripes. The jukebox played a Czech song.

"I'm acting like a goddam fool," Jim Sherwood was saying. "But I just couldn't eat those pa—pal——"

"*Palačinky*."

"Yeah. Vlasta used to make them. They were light and fluffy. Tasted as if they'd been made in Heaven and sent down by an angel."

"I didn't know you were a poet, Jim," said Louis. During the past ten minutes, while eating roast pork with caraway, potato dumplings and sauerkraut, they had switched from a last-name to a first-name basis. This switch was far more significant than such colloquial switches ordinarily happen to be. A few days ago Jim Sherwood had opened the door of his office for Louis to get out. Now there was great warmth in his voice. Louis had become his best friend.

"I don't know what's happened to me ever since I came back from Prague," Jim was saying. "I was sunk. Goddammit, the worst part of it was that there was nobody I could talk to. They just wouldn't understand, those guys here. Gosh, you're actually the first guy from Prague I've ever met since I left Vlasta." His eyes were filled with tears.

"Those *knedlíky* she made for me—the dough was so light and sweet. Filled with apricots. Then she would put on poppyseed and melted butter."

"Or dried hoop cheese," said Louis.

"I liked them better with poppyseed and melted butter. You

had to eat them while they were steaming hot. Vlasta would bring in a full plate and then she would go back into the kitchen and bring another plate. Oh, Christ." He sighed. "Jesus, I just can't get over it. Here I am sitting with a man who actually lived in the same part of the town as Vlasta."

"Practically in the same street," said Louis. He had never lived in Prague, but he had been there as he had been in Warsaw, Budapest, Vienna, Bukarest, Zürich, and Paris. He had an excellent memory for places. He remembered having gone to the district of Prague, where that girl Vlasta was living, one night after a wild party. Fortunately he hadn't been drinking that night. Now, after all these years, he was able to remember the details of the place. "There was that park and then you had to turn to your right——"

"Left," Jim said.

"Sure. Left, and then across that old square——"

"Yes, that was the house. The smell of marble in the cold stairway. The lights would go out automatically after thirty seconds. The fun we had with those lights." Jim was swept by another wave of nostalgia.

"Let's get out of here before I make a dope of myself," Jim said. "Some day I'm going to tell you the whole story. Christ, what a story!"

He called the waiter and paid the check, while Louis raised only the mildest of protests, and they walked back to Sherwood's office. By the time they arrived on the premises, Louis Delinc-Matous found himself on the payroll of the Harry W. Overstreet Associates in the capacity of "adviser." The new "adviser" was going to work closely with Mr. Sherwood, it was said. He would have an office of his own and the use of Mr. Sherwood's secretary. This arrangement, Louis was sure, would be satisfactory for the secretary as well as for him.

It didn't seem necessary to be shown the ropes of the philanthropic business by an experienced associate. What coaching there was going to be, would be done by Jim Sherwood. For the time being the new adviser's duty was to write a couple of letters to a lady in Prague called Vlasta. The letters would be signed by Jim. It was to be hoped that they would bring a

speedy answer from the lady who hadn't written for eight months. Apart from this duty, Louis' assignment was to make "contacts" for the philanthropic business. It was a cinch for a man who knew how to wear his clothes and his charm. America was a cinch.

17

THE BAR of the Plaza was dim. There was the discreet clinking of glasses behind the counter and the muted sounds of the string ensemble from the Palm Room. Louis ordered Vat 69, one ice cube only, soda. He liked the bar. One could sit there unobserved, observing the people, a strategic entrenchment from where to launch campaigns for "contacts."

He hadn't been very successful since he'd been hired by Jim Sherwood, five weeks ago, but those things take time. "The slower you work, the better the pay-off," he would say to Jim Sherwood, who would merely nod and ask him how come that Vlasta hadn't answered yet? Louis said that mail to the Continent took longer these days, what with all those rumors of war. Fortunately Sherwood was out of town much of the time and Mr. Overstreet hardly ever came to the office. The only person Louis talked to was his auburn-haired secretary and with her he didn't discuss business.

"It's a great life," he had said to Kamin a few days ago.

Kamin nodded. "Still conquering America in five easy lessons?"

"Why not? The blueprint has worked out fine," Louis said. He knew that he couldn't fool Kamin. That fellow should have become a doctor, like his father. He would have made a great diagnostician.

At times Kamin's unimpressibility would send Louis into helpless rages. There had always been a lingering frustration

in Louis' mind; a suspicion that Kamin got more out of life than he himself did. Kamin had never done spectacular things. He was sitting in a rented room writing a book probably nobody cared for. But unexplicably Kamin had friends. People liked him. Britta, for instance.

They had never talked about Britta, by mutual agreement. But Louis knew certain facts. Britta had met Kamin in Paris. She'd been in love with him. It might have been a temporary infatuation but she had been in love with Kamin and not with Louis.

It was preposterous. Kamin, who was so unspectacular, almost dull at times. What had she seen in him? Louis sighed. You might know them all but you never knew them. . . . He would have dropped Kamin long ago, if he hadn't needed him. But Kamin was close to Jeff Baldwin. You might need Jeff Baldwin and his family one day. At the Overstreet offices they had become quite excited when Louis told them that he was a "close friend" of Jeff's.

"If you can hook the Baldwins from Maryland," Jim Sherwood had said, "you'll hit the jackpot. They are just the people we need to head a distinctive list of pledges."

"One of the largest real-estate fortunes in the country," Mr. Overstreet had agreed. "The Baldwins own practically half of Maryland."

I wonder how big Maryland is, Louis thought. His private geography of the United States was limited to a narrow square of Manhattan, bordered by the North River, the East River, Wall Street and Central Park South.

"Hello," a girl's voice said.

Louis looked up. He saw an ugly girl with the face of a freckled mouse. She was small and had big feet and her dress, a simple woolen dress, didn't quite fit her. She sat down across from Louis and smiled. She had a nice smile and kind eyes but he hated ugly people.

"Isn't this—a mistake?" he said.

"No, it isn't. My name is Nikki. Yours is Delinc-Matous. You live on our floor."

"Your floor?"

"My grandmother has rented half of it," she said. "Will you have a drink with me?"

Louis always remembered his father's saying, "I can't stand ugly people." He wondered what his father would say seeing him with this girl.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm expecting someone."

"*Allons*," she said. "You can do better than that." She settled down comfortably. "My grandmother wouldn't approve of my sitting here."

Gaston, the old French waiter came shuffling along and the girl said, "Scotch and soda, Gaston. Two doubles. *Dépêchez-vous, mon vieux*."

Gaston suffered from varicose veins and never smiled at anybody. He gave her a fond look. "*Tout de suite*, Your Highness."

"Your Highness?" said Louis. "What's that, a joke?"

"Sort of," she said. "Between the waiter and me. He's such a nice old man."

"Are you French?"

"Belgian."

Gaston came back with the drinks. "*Merci*, Gaston. Put it on the bill." She mixed his drink. "Enough soda? I know you from the elevator, Monsieur, though I don't think you've ever noticed me." She laughed and sipped her drink.

He was pleased that girls were noticing him in the elevator but he wished they would be prettier than this little mouseface.

"I'm terribly interested in people," she was saying. "Perhaps because I've never had a chance to meet many. They always cooped me up in old castles, but I'm in America now. So I've decided to get acquainted with all the people on our floor by way of a starter. There is Mr. Alvary, the Hungarian playwright and his wife," she said. "He calls himself 'The Eternal Exile.' I was in the elevator yesterday when he talked to M. Roget. 'I'm the eternal exile,' he said. 'In Vienna I was known as the exile from Budapest and in Budapest they considered me a fugitive from Vienna's Josefstaedter Theater. Now people here call me an exile from Hollywood because I've once worked in a picture there, don't remind me, and when I get to Hollywood, the columnists refer to me as the exile from Broadway.'"

She was mimicking Mr. Alvary's Hungarian accent, thick as the gravy of paprika goulash. Louis got up. A funny girl, he thought, but a waste of time.

"Don't you want to finish your drink?"

"You finish it for me, Your Highness," he said with mock deference. "You seem to like it."

He strode out fast. When he passed the information desk, the clerk said, "Beg your pardon, sir, did you talk to the Princess? She was inquiring about you."

"Look here, old man," said Louis. "What's that gag about the Princess?"

"Gag?" The clerk told Louis the name of the girl. It sounded impressive even the way he misspelled it. "She is a real Belgian princess," the clerk said with deep satisfaction. He was from Nebraska and recalled fondly his two years' apprenticeship at night clerk at Claridge's in London. "One of the oldest families in Belgium, sir. She lives with Mrs. Brown on the sixteenth floor."

"Mrs. Brown?"

"Mrs. H. S. Brown," the clerk said with subtle emphasis. "The meat-packing Browns, sir. Brown's Balmy Breakfast Bacon. The one who's giving millions for charity, you'll remember . . ."

Something hit Louis straight in the solar plexus, spinning him around and back into the bar. But the mouseface had gone; the table was empty. He ran to the nearest telephone and called up his secretary. When he had all the information, he was beginning to realize that he had made a magnificent fool of himself, and botched the best "contact" any employee of Harry W. Overstreet could ever hope to make.

* * *

Nikki's family with its related branches and intermarriages took up one hundred and fourteen distinguished lines in the Almanac de Gotha; in Belgium, every school kid knew the story of the founder of the family, Sir Something-or-Other, The Magnificent Desperado. Way back in the fifteenth century, he had done raping, cheating, killing, burning and rob-

bing on such a successful scale that he'd become the pet subject of his contemporary poets and song-writers.

From her great ancestor, Nikki, short for Nicole, had inherited an insatiable thirst for adventure. Her grandmother didn't allow her to roam the streets of New York, but the elevator and the hotel lobby and the bar were a gold mine for Nikki's wide-eyed pursuits.

There was Mr. Alvary, the Hungarian playwright who talked like an opera singer, his large hands underscoring his words, drawing exclamation points, periods, question marks into the air. He was a forceful man with a bushy mustache. During his trips in the elevator, Mr. Alvary would get into violent arguments with M. Philippe Roget, another guest on Nikki's floor, a stooped man with a spongelike face. M. Roget seemed to have trouble with his breath, which came out rasping, perhaps owing to the amount of *pâté de foie gras* which he had been eating all his life. He seemed to be strangely out of place with his light-gray pants, dark-blue jacket, gray Homburg, polka-dot tie, white spats and cane with silver knob. Once Nikki heard him say to Mr. Alvary and Mr. Delinc-Matous, while they were riding down in the elevator, "I just had a letter from my niece Fernande in Paris. She married my son Marcel who is in the French Army. Now she's going to have a baby and wants money. Fernande says they've lost most of their money in the past few months. It's terrible, Messieurs, I assure you."

Nikki was hardly listening. She was staring at Mr. Delinc-Matous. He was her dream prince. He was fascinating in a strange, Balkan way. She had made subtle inquiries at the hotel about Mr. Delinc-Matous. The information thus gathered was not particularly revealing. His credit standing was good. He had an account with the Chase National Bank, was working for a fund-raising firm in Rockefeller Center, slept in light-blue pajamas, used three different kinds of hair tonic, visited the barbershop once a week and didn't like starched shirts.

It was not enough to build a solid case of hero worship on, but Nikki was only twenty-one and she found Louis strangely

attractive. Nikki took her questions to her grandmother, the smartest woman on earth.

"Delinc-Matous, with a hyphen?" said the old lady. "Funny name, my dear."

"He is divinely fascinating," said Nikki.

"Why don't you ask your friend Alexis Souvarov, the society columnist? Alexis knows all the fascinating people."

Mrs. H. S. Brown was a frail, fragile doll of a woman with a majestic crown of white hair. If she'd been made of china, she would have been a fine piece of Sévres. She had a black velvet band around her neck, always wore black silk dresses, and she could drink more than half a dozen members of the National Maritime Union. She spent her days and most of her nights in a comfortable armchair by the window overlooking the Plaza. She had a cane next to her, which she used to shoo away the pigeons on the window sill.

Mrs. H. S. Brown had lived in America for over fifty years. Before that she had been a princess. That had been changed, rather abruptly, when she fell in love with H. S. Brown, from Chicago, Illinois, whom she had met while they were both admiring the Mona Lisa in the Paris Louvre. Her eloping with H. S. Brown and marrying him had been quite a shock to her family, and one of the major *fin-de-siècle* scandals among the decadent aristocratic circles of Western Europe.

"*Fantastique*," her brother Felix had said. "Running off to Chicago. Place is full of ex-convicts. Of course, nobody goes to America unless he has to."

She was promptly disinherited and stripped of her title. Brother Felix and the other members of the House did their best to cover up the story but somehow the news trickled back to Belgium that H. S. Brown was working in Chicago in the slaughterhouses.

"*Incroyable*," brother Felix said. "Probably standing in a dirty yard, surrounded by swarms of black flies, wearing a bloodstained apron, killing heads of cattle. They throw them into machines and turn them right into sausages, hair, skin, and hooves. *Pensez donc!*"

Brother Felix, a noted huntsman, who liked to shoot two hundred quail in a day's hunting, had a fine feeling for the subtle differentiation of killing.

"*Enfin*," he would say, "as far as the family is concerned, she is dead."

One could almost hear the period following the word "dead."

Forty-one years later, H. S. Brown died, after a long and happy life by the side of his wife, the former Belgian princess, leaving her the big house in Evanston, Illinois, the castle in Santa Barbara, the beach house in Newport, several good-sized bundles of American T. & T., Dupont, Chrysler and Eastman-Kodak shares, and one of the largest meat-packing firms in the United States. About that time brother Felix, through what he liked to call *force majeure*, had lost most of his castles, forests, hunting lodges, houses, securities and paintings. Of a sudden Mrs. H. S. Brown found herself the savior of her noble, if somewhat bankrupt relatives. She agreed to keep them going on condition that they would never bother her in person. But she made an exception when they had sent over Nikki, some months back.

Mrs. Brown had never gone back to Europe in all these years. Recently, brother Felix had offered her the only thing he'd managed to save, "a prominent location" at the family grave near Liège.

She refused to be buried in Belgium. "It's cold there," she said. "I want to be nice and warm, when I die."

Mrs. Brown consulted the biggest undertakers in the United States concerning the location of a burial place that would be warm all year round. One mortician suggested a comfortable grave near Phoenix, Arizona.

"Sunshine three hundred days of the year," he said, rubbing his hands cheerfully. "We can get you a choice location, facing south."

Mrs. Brown took a trip to Phoenix, surveyed the suggested site, had a tall drink on her prospective grave, made all the arrangements and sent the undertakers a check. She was all set now.

"Delinc-Matous," the old lady said, musing. "Funny name. What's this new idol of yours doing for a living?"

"He's working for a fund-raising firm."

"Oh—oh," Mrs. Brown said.

"What do you know about it?" Nikki asked, belligerently.

"My dear, if you had given away as many millions as my husband, God bless him, and I gave, you'd be the greatest authority on practical philanthropy."

"You haven't even seen him."

"I've seen too many of them in my time," said the old woman. "I saw them as long as fifty years ago. In Biarritz, Monte Carlo, the Lido. They never seem to change. There's one I remember very well."

Nikki sat down at her grandmother's feet. "Tell me about him."

"I was as old as you are now, child. For one beautiful summer he was my escort on the Lido." The old woman smiled.

"What did he look like?"

"Tall, strong, sun-tanned. He looked wonderful with the white *plage* as background. All the girls were crazy about him. I suppose *you'd* call him divinely fascinating—or fascinatingly divine. He spent every minute with me. He took me out in the moonlight and whispered verse into my ear."

Nikki clasped her grandmother's hand. "And then, *grand-mère?*"

The old woman was smiling, looking into space. "I went back to Belgium with my mother. On the train she told me that Andrea had borrowed twenty thousand lire from her. I didn't mind. It had been worth the money. Later I found out that the verse which he'd whispered into my ear, was from Dante's *Divine Comedy*."

18

"MONSIEUR Delinc-Matous," the headwaiter of the Bistro said, making his extra-special bow. "*Bon soir, ma princesse*. Table for two?"

"Three," said Louis, pointing at Kamin. "How are things, Georges?"

The velvet cord was lifted as if by magic and they walked right through a staring crowd of people who'd been standing there half an hour, waiting to get a table. Obscure millionaires from Iowa and run-of-the-mill tycoons from Chicago who had neglected to win the headwaiter's sympathies. Kamin remembered that Louis had always derived a peculiar satisfaction from being known in person to night-club headwaiters and orchestra leaders. He was happily waving to people at the tables. He was an insider; he belonged. It seemed just like old times to Kamin, the small night club back home, where Louis was proud of his first-name relationship with waiters, washroom attendants and bartenders. They made him feel deliciously conspicuous.

Louis turned toward Kamin. His cheeks were flushed. He had put on what his schoolmates had called Louis' "mirror face," the kind of face he would *like* to have had. Raising his eyebrows, stretching the skin above his cheekbones, the face of the conquering hero.

"You like the place?" he asked Kamin.

Kamin nodded. He had never been able to distinguish between night clubs as one distinguishes between people or books or symphonies. Night clubs seemed all the same to him. Dazzling for the first five minutes, their artificial glitter soon fading into a series of debunking close-ups, the tired look of the hat-check girl counting her money, the glass of beer under the trumpeter's chair, a half-loud argument between two waiters.

"What's the hurry, kid?" a slick-faced, stout man with quick, clever eyes said to Nikki.

"Hello, Alexis!"

"Come on in, folks. Sit down here with me. I was getting fed up with myself," said Alexis Souvarov, the columnist. He half got up from the bench. He shook hands with Louis and Louis patted his shoulder, and introduced Kamin. Louis was eminently pleased to be sitting beside Alexis. From somewhere champagne glasses and a magnum of Moët et Chandon were brought, and the glasses were filled. There were half a dozen places in New York where champagne would always appear magically in front of Alexis Souvarov.

"Are you two going steady now?" Alexis asked Louis and Nikki. "That's the third time in one week I've been seeing you together."

"Is that an item?" Louis asked.

"Don't you have anything else to write about?" asked Nikki. "You've given me enough space in the past six weeks."

"Your name looks lovely in print, honey," said Alexis. "It isn't every day that I get an honest-to-goodness princess. The printers love to set it up and the readers love to read it. I wish you would start wearing your crown jewels when you go out, honey."

"I never had any jewels."

"Why don't you get some inexpensive imitations at a department store? You owe it to my readers, Nikki. A princess *has* to wear some jewels."

"Sometimes," Nikki said sadly, "I don't understand America."

"Americans are nice people," said Alexis. "Trouble is they started with the Pilgrims. Nice, respectable, but extremely dull people."

"You're talking like my grandmother, Alexis. She says all her American friends are sorry that she gave up her family title. They would be more pleased to be the friends of a princess."

"*Le vieux crocodile*," said Alexis, fondly. "How is my venerable glamour girl?"

"She was very cross with me today," said Nikki.

"She doesn't want Nikki to go out with me," said Louis.

Alexis shrugged. "Can you blame her?"

"I don't understand it," said Louis.

"What's she got against Louis?"

"She thinks he wants to get her money for his fund-raising firm," said Nikki.

"I don't blame her," said Alexis. "I happen to think the same thing."

They started to laugh. Louis made an attempt to laugh with them but he didn't bring it off successfully.

"I make it a principle never to mix pleasure with business," Louis said. He sounded hurt.

"What am I?" said Nikki. "Business?"

"Don't be silly, *chérie*."

"I didn't seem much pleasure to you when you first met me," she said, grinning maliciously. "You should have been there," she said to Kamin. "He almost threw the drink in my face."

"What made you change your mind, Louis?" Alexis said.

She shrugged. "I guess Louis found out how much my grandmother was worth."

The color seemed to creep into Louis' cheeks.

Kamin had been puzzled by the relationship of Louis and Nikki. It didn't make much sense. Nikki was nice; once you liked her, you liked her very much. She was forthright and kind. Her kindness came out when she smiled. She was almost pretty when she was smiling.

But she wasn't the kind of girl Louis would go for. People certainly wouldn't stare after Nikki; she wasn't decorative, and it took you a long time to find out that she wasn't ugly at all. Why, then, would Louis care for her? "I guess Louis found out how much my grandmother was worth." That explained matters, of course. There remained the question of what Nikki saw in Louis. She had brains—hadn't she found out about him yet? Probably not, Kamin decided. Louis was considerate and charming toward her. Poor Nikki was in love with him.

There was no band at the Bistro but only an emaciated,

hollow-eyed French piano player named Joubin who sang the current American hit-parade tunes with a heavy French accent and played the piano with the abrupt one-*two*, one-*two* rhythm that had been fashionable ten years ago in the cheap cafés around the Bastille.

The patrons of the Bistro loved it. The Bistro had been a cheap gin mill on Third Avenue not so long ago. The entrance door had had no handle and a metal border had run along its lower part, because the customers would kick the door open or shut it with their feet. Now there was a Dali-ish black ebony door with nightmarish red stripes and it was opened and closed by an arrogant, uniformed doorman. The transformation of the Bistro from gin mill to one of the town's most expensive night clubs had been one of the major achievements of Alexis Souvarov, the columnist.

* * *

Alexis would come to the Bistro every night around ten-thirty. He had three offices, one at his Park Avenue apartment, one at the newspaper and the third at his feature syndicate, but he did most of his business from behind his table at the Bistro which he had named the Pillbox. With war practically a certainty, it was fashionable to throw around military terms.

Alexis would sit behind the Pillbox, checking off the people who came in, making mental notes of their romantic entanglements, watching them on the dance floor. The men would smile at him, slapping his shoulder in a gesture of uneasy familiarity, and the girls would give him a nod that was nothing but a way of curtsying. They would whisper "items" into his ears and send him notes through the waiters. Sometimes those bits of information might be transformed into Innuendo, Malice or Ridicule by a few mechanical processes involving typewriter ribbons, printers' ink, linotype machines and newsprint.

Alexis' column was distinguished by an utter disregard for conventional grammar. The sentences were separated from one another by three dots which Alexis called "my three pistol shots." And they were unfinished. Alexis' unfinished sentences

were the greatest unfinished things since the Schubert Symphony No. 8, in B-minor.

It was a fascinating game. The people—Alexis called them his “subjects”—knew what Alexis could do to them, and Alexis knew that they knew it, which made for an interesting if somewhat involved relationship between the columnist and his “subjects.”

His helpfulness was well known. Once he'd been evicted from his Park Avenue apartment because there had been too many people sleeping there, friends of Alexis' who had found the going temporarily tough. His secretaries had a long list of what he called the “retainers” to which Alexis constantly added new names. He would send them checks, liquor and most of the two thousand neckties which he was given at Christmas by press agents, night-club owners and public-relations officers.

A great many people had been friendly to Alexis Souvarov since the summer of 1929, when he had arrived in this country from Vladivostok and points Far East. His assets had included his grandfather's titled name; a Nansen passport; a great admiration for Pushkin, de Maupassant and Mark Twain; an excellent tennis backhand; and eleven dollars and fifty cents in American currency.

The eleven dollars and fifty cents had paid the fare to the estate of a white-haired, White-Russian lady on Long Island, who had been a friend of Alexis' family; the backhand had launched him on his social career on the lady's private tennis court; his admiration for Pushkin, de Maupassant and Mark Twain made him learn the business of writing; the Nansen passport was discarded in favor of a Certificate of Naturalization; and the name of his grandfather blazed his trail into café society. Alexis Souvarov had done well with his assets.



Joubin, the piano player, was playing and singing “Les Fraises et les Framboises.” Louis and Nikki had joined the crowd on the dance floor. Louis was an excellent dancer. Nikki would dance with him for hours, though at the Bistro you could hardly

call it dancing. On the small dance floor the dancers were intertwined, their heads and arms standing out of the mass of bodies like fast-growing weeds between grains. The young girls with their pretty, empty faces, short-nosed, long-lashed, quick-frozen goddesses from Wichita, Salem and Des Moines. Under the dim lights, their alabaster-white shoulders made Kamin think of the plaster-of-Paris mannekins left undressed overnight in the shop windows of women's dress stores. When they talked to their escorts, they seemed to be anxious not to jeopardize their make-up by extravagant laughter.

A white-clad chef in a high hat, with a napkin around his neck stepped by the table.

"My friend Anatol, the famous chef of the Bistro," said Alexis. "Formerly with Dupont in Paris. Anatol can turn a twenty-five-cent fruit cup into a wonderful three-dollar Coupe Saint-Jacques, without any additional expense."

"No trouble at all," said Anatol.

"Kamin is practically a Parisian," Alexis said to the chef.

"In that case," said the chef, "I'll make you a Soufflé Marianne."

"What's a Soufflé Marianne?"

"Marianne was our girl in Paris," Alexis said. "Spent the first two weeks of the month with me and the last two with Anatol."

"Alexis got paid on the first and I on the fifteenth of the month," said Anatol. "*Qu'elle était ravissant!*"



The captain came over to the table and whispered to Alexis.

"Claire?" said Alexis. "Sure. Bring her right in."

There was a commotion inside the entrance, and a blonde woman wearing a smart black suit and no hat came toward the Pillbox. She was followed by a tall, straight colonel.

"Claire!" Alexis cried. "Where have you been?"

"Bermuda, darling. I didn't know we needed the password from you to get in here."

"This is Claire Sheraton," Alexis said. "Once Texas offered

her secession from the Union, transformation into a Monarchy and the crown of the Queen, if Claire would agree to stay there."

"Long live the Queen!" said Louis. He bent down over Claire's hand and kissed her fingers. She gave him a quick, amused glance. She was a beautiful woman, in an expressionless way. So much had been done to her blonde hair that it now looked as though nothing had been done to it.

"This is Colonel Briggs," said Claire. "General Staff Corps. West Point class something. Also called Corny Briggs. On account of his jokes."

The colonel was looking for a spot to knock out his pipe. He seemed always to be having trouble with his pipe. He would knock it out against the table, the ash tray, his shoe, somebody else's chair.

"At ease, Claire," Colonel Briggs said. "It's Army War College '31." He had the metallic voice of the professional soldier and kept himself straight, a professional, gentleman. He was sun-tanned and reminded Kamin of the tanned, well-profiled gentlemen who seemed to lead a strange existence on the advertising pages in *Esquire*.

Alexis studied the colonel fixedly. "All colonels look alike," he said. "American, French, English, Russian, Bulgarian, Norwegian and Mexican colonels. There's none of the fine individual subtleties among them that one finds between the ordinary soldiers of different nations. Students of anthropology will bear me out on that."

The colonel had the facial expression of a man who has started out to attend a lecture by the chief of staff and unaccountably winds up at a nudists' camp.

"Speaking of different nations—I saw the doorman outside," said Claire. "Didn't I meet him on the reviewing stand in Bucharest when he was Grand Admiral and took in the parade of the Rumanian fleet?"

"Honey, the Black Sea doesn't reach up to Bucharest," said Alexis. "The Rumanians tried their best but they couldn't make a deal with the Black Sea."

"How do you know?"

"I was there fifteen years ago. Spent two weeks in the Bucharest jail."

The captain and two waiters brought more glasses and another bottle of champagne.

"Darling, is that the guy and the little princess you've been giving all that publicity lately?" Claire whispered to Alexis.

"Uh-huh. This is Prince Charming. You like him?"

She didn't answer. "No champagne for me," she said to the waiter, covering the glass with the palm of her hand. "Haig pinchbottle, please."

A goddess came by and smiled at Alexis without moving a muscle in her face. She kissed him on the forehead and whispered something.

"That bitch!" Alexis said to her. "And she told me today that she would go to Reno first thing after breakfast."

The goddess departed.

"Want to dance?" Louis said to Claire. Kamin saw Nikki's sideways glance but Louis didn't care.

"I'd love to."

Louis watched her while they were dancing. Her mouth was closed but her nostrils were twitching slightly. She had a slim body and was almost as tall as he but he didn't feel her weight.

"I keep wondering where you were all the time?"

"Oh," she said. "I've been around."

"Why didn't we meet before?"

"Is that your standard conversational opening number sixteen?"

"My special for exciting women."

She shook her head. "You men are all alike."

"But you like us, don't you?"

She got out of his arms. "Let's go back to the table."

He took her wrist. "I'm sorry—Claire. *Please* don't be mad at me."

She shrugged. "I'm not mad. I—don't want to dance any more."

"Can't we go someplace else and talk?"

"We can talk here, at Alexis' table."

"I mean you and I. Alone."

She stopped in the aisle between the tables and turned toward him. "I thought you came with your princess?"

"Can you get away from the colonel?"

"Of course not," she said and walked to the table. She sat down next to Colonel Briggs. "Ouff. I need a ton of fresh air."

"Liquids comē by the cubic foot, not by tons," the Colonel said, knocking his pipe against the ash tray.

Claire took her bag and turned toward Nikki. "You coming with me?"

Louis' look followed Claire. "Who is she?" he asked Alexis softly, so the colonel couldn't hear.

"Claire? Haven't you heard of Claire's Cinderella Course?"

"Claire's Cinderella Course?"

"How to wrap every man around a woman's little finger, in ten days. Nationally advertised in the ladies' sheets." Alexis nodded toward two goddesses who passed by. "Better be careful, Louis. Colonel Briggs will be a general as soon as we are in this war. This is not the time to cut in on a general."

19

"I DON'T CARE how it's being done but you've got to cut down *somewhere*, Jim," Mr. Overstreet said.

Jim Sherwood shifted his feet on his desk, in front of which Mr. Overstreet was pacing nervously, playing with his watch key. Jim knew this routine. Every year around Easter, when the off season in philanthropy was about to begin, Mr. Overstreet demanded that the firm's expenses be cut radically. As a rule, a couple of secretaries were fired and a score of the low-salaried help had to take a cut, but the high-bracket incomes of the Associates remained unchanged. At the Harry W. Overstreet Associates', charity did not begin at home.

"You'll have to go over the payroll with a fine comb," said Mr. Overstreet.

Jim Sherwood grunted. Louis was silently standing by the window. He wished he could get out of Jim's office.

"I want every member of this office to bring in new ideas," Mr. Overstreet said. "Constructive ideas. Constructive criticism. We need people with fresh ideas. Nothing like a blood transfusion!"

The phone rang. Jim Sherwood let it ring and after a while it stopped. Mr. Overstreet turned toward Louis.

"How about Mrs. Brown? You've been working on her long enough, Louis."

Careful now. "I've been doing this through her grandchild," said Louis. "The little princess. She's on my side but it's tough. Mrs. Brown says she's already given enough this year."

"According to our statistics," said Mr. Overstreet, "people give only two per cent of their income. Uncle Sam allows us to deduct fifteen per cent for contributions. It's those thirteen per cent that we are after, gentlemen. Mrs. Brown still ought to give thirteen per cent."

"She's made a promise," said Louis.

"How much?"

Mr. Overstreet's blue eyes, that could be gentle as an afternoon in spring, had the glacial quality of cold steel.

"Naturally," Louis said, "we haven't discussed a certain amount. But it's practically in the bag. She's been quite positive about it." He was silent. He wondered what Overstreet would say if he told them what Mrs. Brown had *really* said. But after all, they wouldn't have to find out.

"You'd better give Louis another assignment, Jim," Mr. Overstreet was saying to Sherwood. "We have to double, no, to treble our efforts."

"Does that mean I am off the Brown case?" asked Louis.

"Of course not. But while you go after her, you may as well work for one of the other campaigns. Start him off with a luncheon speech, Jim." Mr. Overstreet stopped his pacing and rolled his watch chain around his index finger. "My wife told

me they want a luncheon speaker next month for their Women's Club. Suppose Louis would go over out there?"

Jim grunted.

Mr. Overstreet raised his right hand, like the Statue of Liberty. "Giving, gentlemen, is a state of mind. Before you can approach a person, you've got to know her attitude toward life. If it doesn't conform with our principles, you have to change her thinking. Mrs. Brown may be a poor giver if she feels actually poor in spite of her millions."

The phone rang again but Mr. Overstreet went on, "It's the heart, not the mind, that makes a person write out a check. The heart must feel the spiritual concept of the brotherhood of men. *Open up their hearts!*"

No one said anything, and Mr. Overstreet went out. Jim Sherwood remained motionless.

Louis said, "I admire your patience, Jim."

"Brother, you can take an awful lot, if it pays well enough, *believe me.*"

"He's too old," Louis said. "And he talks too much."

Jim looked out of the window. It was hard to say what he was thinking about. He turned his face. "Louis," he said, very softly, "what's the matter with the mail? Could it be that Vlasta got the letters and didn't want to answer?"

"Of course she'll answer them. They were real love letters. No woman could ignore them."

Sherwood sighed. "You didn't know Vlasta."

* * *

What had turned out to be the oasis in the desert of Jim Sherwood's emotional life had begun by sheer accident one evening in the beautiful old city of Prague, on Jim's trip to Europe.

He was glad to leave without his wife. He was a good husband; he let her handle his money, the education of his children and the purchase of his shirts. He carried on his affairs in a discreet way so Katherine would not look like a fool. They were a happy couple. It wasn't his fault that once in a while he became restless; every man knows that feeling. But try and explain that to Katherine.

At the American Express they had mapped out for him The Complete Europe Itinerary. Fifteen days England. Nine days Paris. Half a day Marseille (side trip to Château d'If). Nice, Monte Carlo, the Tyrol. Salzburg (purchase chamois leather pants with embroidered braces), Vienna, Prague. Then Budapest, Belgrade, Milan.

"Don't miss Budapest," the clerk had said. "Gypsy music and Tokay wine and *those* women. Everybody speaks English." What he meant was that the headwaiters, hotel clerks and *those* women were able to read the words "The United States of America" on both sides of the American currency bills.

Jim's trip was uneventful until he came to Prague. He had a letter of introduction to a Czech movie actor who was fond of America and was said to have a collection of beautiful Czech women. The actor lived on the third floor of a modern apartment building. A girl opened the door. She was barefooted, wore a blue apron and had her skirt rolled up over her knees. When she saw Jim Sherwood, she uttered a cry and fled. Then a charming, plump woman appeared and motioned Jim to come in. She had a floor brush in her hand. The two women were in the middle of a thorough cleaning—late spring or early summer cleaning. Jim couldn't quite understand it because the place looked spotless anyway. The furniture and rugs had been moved, the floors had been washed with soap and hot water, and there was a strong smell of turpentine.

The plump, charming woman introduced herself as Jenda's housekeeper and told Jim, in French, that the actor had left town over the week-end. Jim promised to write "from America," gave his regards to Jenda and left. He rang for the elevator. The elevator didn't come up. He pressed all the buttons and pounded the elevator door. The housekeeper came out.

"You can't go down in the elevator."

"Why not?"

"No one goes down in the elevator. People come up in the elevator and they walk down." She called the maid and said something to her in Czech. The maid ran down the stairs in her bare feet and came up in the elevator.

Jim Sherwood thanked her casually, pressed the button and

went down. When he arrived there, a sullen-looking woman was standing in front of the elevator. The door to her apartment was open. The smell of stale sauerkraut came out. The woman—he thought she was the janitress—started to shout at him in Czech.

He didn't understand her. The woman continued to shout, her voice getting shriller and angrier.

Jim stood there uncomfortable. Then a girl came in through the entrance door. The light was dim and he couldn't see much of her face but he liked her legs. He could see the sensuous swing of her calves against the light that fell in from the street lamp.

The old woman turned toward the girl and uttered a tongue-breaking series of consonants.

"Sorry," Sherwood said. "I don't understand a word."

The girl laughed. "Oh," she said. "You—*Angličan*, English, huh?"

Her voice seemed to come deeply out of her throat. A husky alto voice that played havoc with his brain nerves.

Now he could see her face in the elevator light. A Slavic peasant's roundish face with a flat little nose and prominent cheekbones. Her eyes were slanted at the corners and her mouth was made up very red, forming a little heart.

* * *

Her name was Vlasta. She was a wonderful lover, passionate, patient and adaptable; a charming woman, a good dancer; she liked to sing and could wind a corkscrew; and she was the best cook he could think of. When she laughed her teeth flashed in her face like the neon signs on Times Square.

"You are crazy," she said to him. "A cr-r-razy American."

She rolled her r's; it sounded like "c-r-r-r-azy." The r's were rolling down his spine. They had dinner in a garden restaurant overlooking the towers, bridges and baroque palaces of the town. A bluish mist came up from the Vltava River, making the lights dance in the doorways and across the bridges, giving Jim Sherwood a dreamy sense of unreality. Any moment now, he said to himself, he was going to wake up and Katherine

would tell him to hurry shaving because breakfast was ready.

There was music coming from a beer garden. They went in and sat on crude wooden benches. They drank dark, dry beer, which he'd never tasted before. Some people had brought their own food with them in small parcels; cold cuts, ham, cheese, salami, slices of dark corn bread. They ate their dinner picnic style and ordered beer with it.

Everybody looked happy. Jim Sherwood couldn't remember having ever seen so many happy people in one place. It increased his sense of unreality: perhaps it was a dream, Vlasta's guttural laughter, the sound of music, the foam on the beer glasses that made bubbles on his lips and Vlasta's consonants that made bubbles on his spine.

Later, they walked across the old Vltava stone bridge. The statues of the Saints looked down at them and the lights of the quay were reflected by the water. There was a golden crucifix with a Hebrew inscription. He took her into his arms and wanted to kiss her.

"No," she said. "No, no, no. Not here." She was very strong and pushed him away.

She stepped in front of the crucifix and crossed herself. Then she turned around. At the end of the bridge she took his head.

"Here," she said and kissed him on the mouth.



She lived on the uppermost floor of the apartment building where he'd met her. As they rode up in the glass-enclosed elevator, he was afraid the plump woman on the third floor would see them. He asked her whether she knew the movie actor.

"Of course," she said. "Everybody knows him."

She laughed in her provocative way. He became terribly jealous. He seized her shoulders and held her so tight that she gasped. The light in the stairway went out.

"Wait. Let me put on the light."

Her hand was gliding along the cold, rough wall. She found the switch and the stairway was bright again. She laughed and they started to fight again and the light went out for the second time.

The living room had a large French window going out on a terrace. The city was down there, at their feet. There was an eerie glimmer of lights and reflections in the Vltava River.

"Go out on the terrace," she said.

"And you?"

"Please go."

He walked out and lay down in a chair. He closed his eyes and heard the water run in her bathroom. Then there were steps in the dark living room behind him, and the rustling of silk underwear. He thought he couldn't bear to stay out there any longer. After what seemed an eternity she came out on the terrace. She had turned on a low light inside, and he saw her silhouette against the light, very slim and supple, her thighs and buttocks. He took her into his arms. He swayed a little and she gave a soft, muted cry, as his hand touched the bare skin of her thighs.

"You're c-r-r-azy," she said. "Dar-r-ling."

* * *

She was lying with her back toward him, cuddled against his body. He kissed her and after a while he turned her around again. The room was dark and he wanted to turn on the light. She pulled his hand down.

"No. You mustn't. I—I don't want it."

"All right, I won't."

"Dar-r-ling . . . *Miláčku* . . ."

"*Miláčku*," he said much later, when he was able to talk again. "What does it mean?" He kissed her.

"It means darling." She laughed. "Aren't you my darling?"

"I don't know. I'm a clumsy son of a bitch."

"You're my c-r-r-azy American, . . ."

She reached out her hand from under his chest and groped for a cigarette. She lighted it and gave it to him. They were lying in the darkness, listening to the faint sounds from outside, and to the satisfied withdrawal of their blood. It's two o'clock now, he thought. Eight o'clock in New York. Katherine putting the children to bed—

"*Miláčku*?"

"Yes?"

"You are not with me."

"Yes, I am. Of course, I am."

He stubbed out the cigarette in the ash tray. He didn't care whether it was eight o'clock in New York. Right now, it was two A.M. here.

* * *

When he woke up, he heard the chimes of the trolley cars from the street. Like Christmas bells. He was lying alone, covered with her blue silk blanket.

He heard steps in the kitchen and smelled melting butter. "Darling," he called. "Vlasta!"

She came in, carrying a saucepan in her hand. She had on a light blue dress and a white apron. She looked beautiful.

"I've been out shopping and when I came back, you were still asleep." She kissed him. "Know what the time is?"

"It must be almost noon."

"It's five in the afternoon. Get up!" She tore away the silk blanket and put the cold saucepan on his bare stomach. She went into hysterics when he shrieked. "Come on, *miláčku*. I'm cooking breakfast-lunch-dinner for you, all in one."

His coat was hanging over a chair. He distinctly remembered that he'd thrown it on the floor last night. She must have picked it up, and hung it up. He took out the time schedule which the American Express people had prepared for him. He was supposed to have left on the Budapest Express ten minutes ago.

After that, he didn't want to be bothered by time. He didn't want to think. The days went by. He didn't care. They drove to the vineyards of Mělník and to the cornfields of štechovice; the old gardens of Prague; the pebblestone courtyards and camphor-smelling palaces. They were behaving like crazy kids. Once they had their short moment in a railroad car. Vlasta thought it would be wonderful in a railroad car, in the middle of a hot, sleepy afternoon.

"You're out of your mind," he said. "Somebody may come in any moment. You can't even lock the compartment."

"Nobody will come in. You can pull the shades."

"How long until the next station?"

She looked out of the window. "About ten minutes."

"You're sure?"

"I've been here often enough."

"With a man?"

"With *many* men."

He shouted at her angrily. She laughed and turned her head away. He kissed her hard. By that time he didn't care if the entire Diplomatic Corps came by. She managed to pull down the shades, just in time.

* * *

He stayed in Prague eleven days. The last night they went for dinner back to the garden restaurant where they had spent their first evening. Jim Sherwood wanted to sit at "their" table but it was taken by two professorial-looking men who were having venison with sour cream and dumplings.

Jim gave the waiter a five-dollar bill and asked him to explain his sentimental wish to the two gentlemen. The waiter went over. After a moment, the professors looked at him with a faint expression of wonderment. Then they saw Vlasta and smiled, and carried their plates over to another table.

Jim said "*Děkuji, Nazdar,*" which were the only two Czech words he'd learned, "Thank you, greetings." They shook hands and Jim asked the waiter to take a bottle of champagne to the two professors.

After dinner, Jim and Vlasta stopped by the beer garden. The people seemed still as happy as ever. But Jim Sherwood couldn't stand it. So they went home.

It was the most wonderful and the most horrible night of his life. In the morning he was all dead. He would have missed his airplane to Paris if Vlasta hadn't waked him. While he shaved, she made his breakfast. She ran down to the baker, to get the warm, crisp rolls that he liked so much.

"I couldn't let you go off without your breakfast, *miláčku,*" she said. It made him think of Katherine. His wife would not

let him go off without breakfast. Goddammit, he didn't want to think of Katherine.

20

EVERY third Thursday the local Women's Club, of which Mrs. Overstreet was president and Katherine Sherwood was program chairman, met at the local hotel in the neat little Westchester community for luncheon consisting of consommé, fried chicken, peas-and-carrots, vanilla ice cream and a guest speaker. Sometimes it would be shrimp cocktail, and veal with string beans, but the vanilla ice cream and the ritual of the guest speaker never changed. Neither did the purpose of the luncheon, which served largely for the re-enforcement of the ladies' social position.

This Thursday Louis was going to be the guest speaker. Mrs. Overstreet was very happy about this arrangement which would save the Club's treasury the speaker's fee. She had told the other members that Louis was Mr. Overstreet's personal discovery, and thus in a way, her discovery, too.

Mr. Overstreet was sick, but he insisted on Jim Sherwood's going out to the luncheon with Louis. "Be sure to brief Louis," Mr. Overstreet told Jim over the phone.

When Louis and Jim arrived at the bright, white dining room of the small hotel, there were about fifty women, representing a bigger-than-average share of the national wealth. Most club members seemed to have bypassed their second youth, but their faces looked well-preserved, and it wasn't easy to define their age. They wore coquettish hats with enormous flower beds mounted on top. When they were seated, they had to keep themselves very stiff and upright, feeling uncomfortable in their tight girdles. They had the bright smiles of

automobile salesmen and chiropractors. To Louis they looked strangely alike, as Chinese or Eskimos would look alike to the eyes of a white man.

"I'll never be able to tell them apart," Louis whispered to Jim.

"As long as you don't forget Mrs. Overstreet's face, you'll be all right," said Jim.

Mrs. Overstreet came sailing toward Louis in her rustling silk dress, "My dear, I am *so* glad to see you. Mr. Overstreet is so *terribly* sorry that he wasn't able to come." Her voice had the sound of a candied foghorn.

Louis found himself shaking hands, hearing flattering comments. He managed to keep his face smiling above the hubbub of their voices. He would talk to one lady, nod to a second, and smile to a third. If it was done well, each of the three women would get the impression that he was giving his undivided attention to her alone. There was an unending line of faces and names. A plump woman with dark messy hair asked him what he thought of the future of the slum children in the cities of Europe but before he could answer, she was pushed aside by a dominating woman with heavy forearms who told Louis that she had been "thrilled" by his latest book. Louis didn't bother to correct her and accepted her enthusiastic praise with what she thought was perfect modesty.

As abruptly as the torrent of voices had started, it ceased. Louis found himself standing all alone, in a sudden vacuum. He saw Jim Sherwood outside in the corridor and joined him.

"H. W. had to fall sick today, of all days," Jim Sherwood said sullenly. "Overstreet's really the only guy in the office who can handle those women."

"What about you?"

"I'm not good at it. They frighten me."

Louis didn't like to admit that he, too, was frightened by their smugness and self-assurance.

"Where's your wife, Jim? Isn't she the program chairman?"

"She must be around. Katherine's always taking on too much and then she has trouble delivering." Louis didn't know what

Jim meant by that. At times Jim Sherwood seemed to be talking in riddles.

Jim turned around. "Well, here she is at last."

"Hello, dear. I've been running around in circles." Katherine Sherwood was slim and attractive. She was much younger than most of the other club members. She would have been very pretty except for a hard line around her mouth. She held her lips pressed together which gave her an expression of permanent suspicion. She had dark hair and big, dark eyes.

She turned her head toward Louis, with a little self-conscious jerk. "So that's our new boy wonder?"

Jim introduced Louis.

"I met Jim's desk right away but it took me a long time to meet his wife," Louis said, holding her hand.

She pushed up her chin. "Don't you know that Jim's married to his office desk?" She withdrew her hand.

"Now, look, dear," Jim said, unhappily.

"Shall we go?" She walked off, without waiting for them. American women would never wait for you.

Louis walked closely behind her, looking down at her hips and her legs. She must have been born with her long, trim legs. Those American legs came in all sizes, already wrapped in silk stockings, with high-heeled shoes. There was a certain motion in her trim body that intrigued Louis—a hostile motion. It was exciting to think of bending back this trim body of hers, bending it down all the way.



Louis was sitting at the head of the table, between Mrs. Overstreet and Katherine Sherwood. The chicken was tough and the ice cream was melting by the time it was served, but nobody seemed to bother about the food.

The ice-cream plates were being cleared away and the waitresses were asking, "More coffee?" Mrs. Overstreet cleared her throat and clinked her coffee spoon against her water glass. The ladies shoved back their chairs and half turned toward the head of the table.

Mrs. Overstreet paid a glowing tribute to "Doctor" Louis Delinc-Matous, today's prominent guest speaker. Using a program that the H. W. Overstreet Associates mailed to their clients she read the list of Louis' alleged achievements, like an auctioneer giving an appraisal.

"... at his age, Doctor Delinc-Matous has a fascinating career behind him, the only man now residing in America who witnessed the burning of the Reichstag, the Vienna bloodbath of 1934, and the assassination of King Alexander of Belgium and Foreign Minister Barthou of Yugoslavia."

Katherine Sherwood whispered into Mrs. Overstreet's ear. Mrs. Overstreet adjusted her glasses and held the program way off from her face with her outstretched hand, so she could read it.

"Sorry, my mistake. It should really say, 'King Alexander of Yugoslavia and France's Foreign Minister Barthou.' . . . Yes, Doctor Delinc-Matous," she paused and slightly bent her head toward Louis, "is one of the very few people who have seen History in the Making."

Damn good catchword, Jim Sherwood thought, staring into the brown grounds of his coffee cup. History in the Making. Even that old hippopotamus couldn't kill it. Jim Sherwood reflected wearily, how much easier things would be if Mrs. Overstreet weren't around. H. W. had often told him that he would have resigned long ago if it hadn't been for Mrs. Overstreet. "I can't just walk around and play golf, with my wife being so active. Too bad, Jim, but there goes your chance of becoming president of Harry W. Overstreet Associates for another year."

"And so, ladies, I'm giving you Doctor Louis Delinc-Matous, whose insight into European affairs is based upon first-hand experience in the arena of the world-shaking events of the past years. *Doctor Delinc-Matous!*"

There was a ripple of applause. Louis stood up, slowly and dignified as befits a Man with Insight. He didn't wear what was known around the Overstreet offices as The Uniform—double-breasted blue serge business suit, white shirt, striped two-dollar tie. He thought he would look more impressive in his gray flannel suit, dark-gray Oxford shirt, grayish Ascot tie.

"Madame Chairman" (*a gracious nod toward Mrs. Overstreet*), "ladies and gentlemen" (*a long, sweeping stare down the table, so each of the listeners would gain the impression you were talking only for her*), "thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your cordial welcome." (*Sigh*) "This is no ordinary after-luncheon speech. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a homecoming for me. Yes, a homecoming." (*A slight pause, to let this tremendous statement sink in.*) "For I would never stand here in front of you, in this country which I am now happy to consider my home, had it not been for the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Overstreet" (*bow toward Mrs. Overstreet*) "and Mr. and Mrs. Sherwood" (*bow toward Jim and her—those eyes of hers . . . what goes on behind them?*).

"Jesus," Jim Sherwood whispered in embarrassment, "cut it out, will you?"

Somebody started to applaud and there was an ovation for the Overstreets and the Sherwoods. Mrs. Overstreet beamed with pride. Louis stood at the head of the table, lightly clapping his hands, a famous conductor who can well afford to give applause to his soloist.

"Your chairman," Louis was now saying, "should be given additional credit. She did not mispronounce my name." (*Laughter*) "My name has been frequently mispronounced since I came to this great country. Which brings me to a story that happened to me at the pier when I arrived. . . ."

Louis was off on his Anecdote Number One. There would be four more anecdotes, strategically scattered throughout his speech. Mr. Overstreet didn't like more than five anecdotes and they had to be good, clean fun.

"... and looking back at my wanderings from the safe bastion of this place which I'd like to call home, it seems that it was merely a question of being awake. Being *wide-awake*."

Way down, at the end of the table, the Lady with the Messy Hair wondered what in hell was brilliant about that Man of Insight, who seemed to be a mere platitude salesman.

Being wide awake, Jim Sherwood thought. Jesus, what crap. And they fall for it. If I ever become president of Harry W. Overstreet, I'll have to ease out Crown and Gussman, those

perennial Overstreet stooges. Louis will want one of their jobs. It's customary to give a job to a conspirator. Well, maybe not a job. I'll give him Gussman's office. A nice office means more to Louis than a good salary. He can have Sally, the auburn-haired secretary, all for himself . . . If only Vlasta would answer the letters. . . .

The thought of Vlasta made him sigh.

"What's the matter?" his wife whispered.

"Nothing."

"Stop stirring your coffee. They'll think you are bored."

". . . so that it boils down to three questions: What *was* the mistake of the democracies? *Was* it a mistake? And *were* they democracies?"

Louis stopped, looking dramatically into space.

"The question remains whether we're going to have peace or war. Peace, with its promise of progress and happiness; or war, with destruction, hunger, disease in its wake. I've seen war, Madame Chairman, ladies and gentlemen. Yes, I've seen war with my own eyes."

Louis made another dramatic pause. Jim Sherwood was dying for a glass of water.

"I've seen war in Ethiopia, in Spain, in Manchukuo," Louis said. "But whom am I telling this? You are the best-informed people on earth" (*A slight bow*). "You read more books than any other nation on earth. You know more than the statesmen and generals of Europe. They stand on the stage of history, blinded by the footlights, while you are sitting in the auditorium, watching the cavalcade of history roll by. . . ."

Jesus, Jim Sherwood thought, another five minutes of this and I won't be able to see straight. If he's been in Ethiopia, Spain and Manchukuo, I'll tear out my hair, one by one. He's the worst liar I've met in a long line of distinguished liars. What a lousy speech! We'll have to do something about Louis. Sooner or later, people are going to get wise to him.

Jim's mind flashed back from Louis to H. W. Overstreet and the presidency of the Harry W. Overstreet Associates. It might be better to force a showdown now than later. First thing was to get off Crown and Gussman. Then Overstreet might be eased

out even without a fight. That's it, Jim thought. I get the presidency and Louis gets Gussman's office. It's more than he deserves but he'll have to write more letters to Vlasta.

* * *

After dinner they moved out onto the porch, where it was cooler. "Liqueur with your coffee?" asked Katherine Sherwood.

"Some cognac?" said Louis.

"Jim," she said, by way of an order.

He got up. "I don't think there's any brandy left, Louis. How about a whiskey?"

Louis waited until Jim had gone. "Cigarette?" he asked Katherine. She nodded and put a cigarette into her long holder. Louis held out his lighter. For a moment, their fingers touched.

"Thanks." She exhaled the smoke. He could see the straight line of her profile. He liked the way she stuck out her chin. He wondered about Katherine. She seemed cold on the outside, but perhaps it was cold fire. He didn't know how to approach her.

"I like you much better without that silly hat you had on at the luncheon."

"I paid fifty dollars for that silly hat."

"Still—I like to see your hair."

Jim Sherwood came back with the drinks and sat down. The three of them were staring at the soft line of the Westchester hills, each busy with his own thoughts. After a while Jim took his glass and got up from his chair. "Good night, Louis. See you at breakfast."

He didn't say good night to his wife and shuffled away. They heard him walk up the stairs. Then his steps were in the room above them.

"What's the matter with Jim?" asked Louis.

"I don't know. He's been like that ever since he came back from Europe, two years ago. All of a sudden he goes to pieces. Walks out in the middle of a party, and lets me sit there. It's not the first time that he's humiliated me in front of strangers."

Louis took her hand. She didn't withdraw it. "I'm not a stranger, Katherine."

"You are a guest. And it's very bad manners."

"I don't mind—as long as *you* don't leave me."

She was lying in her chair, her eyes closed. Her face wasn't pretty in repose.

"I think I'll have to go up. You stay here, as long as you please."

He didn't run after her. There was no hurry now. His hour would come, and he had learned to wait. Waiting was the most important part of the game.

He settled down in his chair, sipping his drink. It would be fun to help Jim ease out old Overstreet. And even more fun to ease Jim out of his wife's affections. Louis loved intrigues. He'd always been entangled in intrigues, in school, at his father's law firm, in home-town politics. He liked to think of himself as a master of subterfuges and subtle tricks.

Upstairs Katherine made clicking sounds with her high heels but Louis had already forgotten about her. He was sorry he had never run into this Czech girl named Vlasta. From what Jim had told him she must have been quite a number.

* * *

The announcement on the financial and business page of the *Times* stated laconically that Harry W. Overstreet, president of Harry W. Overstreet Associates, was going to retire as president and would accept the position of Chairman of the Board. Mr. Overstreet would assist "in an advisory capacity" the new president, James Sherwood.

The announcement didn't cause any sensation. It coincided with another announcement. Mr. Chamberlain was proclaiming a state of war between His Majesty's government and Germany.

* * *

Louis opened the door to his office. "My new place," he said proudly to Kamin. "It belonged to Gussman who went out with H. W. Overstreet."

Kamin looked over the large room. Cherry-wood panel walls;

the windows, fashioned in old style, created an old-country dignity.

Kamin shrugged. "I've never been to 10 Downing Street, but that's what it must be like there."

"Yes, sir," Louis said. "It's quite a place." From the window one could look all over Manhattan. The financial district was right in the palm of your hand, yours for the asking.

"How's business?" Kamin asked.

"Wonderful," Louis said. It was the only thing to say when everything was going to pieces. Since the beginning of the war in Europe, business had fallen off sharply. Jim Sherwood said they would have to start cutting down. And there was no hope of getting any contribution from Mrs. H. S. Brown. Louis had been wasting his time with Nikki.

There had been other troubles. The New York upstate campaign was a big flop. In Syracuse a man stood up and said he'd lived in Europe for the past seven years and Louis didn't know what he was talking about. Louis wasn't a master of fast repartee. It had been a pitiful moment. He wished he could have blacked out for a minute, so he would not have to remember their malicious, grinning faces.

But the worst part was that Sherwood's girl from Prague hadn't answered. Jim was getting impatient.

"Business has been wonderful," Louis was now saying to Kamin. "You can see." He made a sweeping gesture. "They even gave me this magnificent office."

Kamin shook his head. "Why don't you stop pretending, Louis?"

Their eyes met. Then Louis looked away.

"You don't have to impress *me*, Louis. I know what they are saying about you around this place."

"You've been talking to Overstreet?"

"I was there last week-end. . . . That was a dirty thing to do, Louis."

"Did you come here to preach?"

Kamin looked out of the window. "I'm sorry for you, Louis."

"Sorry?"

"You were a lucky fellow. You had more money, more women, more suits, more liquor than the rest of us. I remember one of your girls I was crazy about. That pale blonde with the Danish name. She was a dancer at the Savoy. I used to look at her picture that was displayed at the photographer's across from the night club."

"I don't remember," Louis said. "There were so many. Maybe it was the one called Lilly."

"I remember the picture. Her head tilted back, an ecstatic expression on her face." Kamin stared into space.

"I don't remember her," Louis said. "But then, I don't remember any of them. I remember only the first one."

"Marion Mara?"

Louis nodded. "She was The Woman." He sounded wistful.

"I read about her in the papers," Kamin said. "She's certainly become a big star. On the screen and in politics."

Louis shoved back his chair, stretched out his legs and covered his eyes. "I wish I could forget her. I wish I could forget *everything*."

He sounded tired, a wornout actor in his dressing room after an exhausting performance. He seemed helpless, pathetic.

"Kamin, I must be losing my grip," he said. It sounded like a confession.

"Why don't you get wise to yourself?" Kamin said. "You've tried too hard to outsmart all the other people."

"Yes," Louis said. "And I've outsmarted only myself."

It was very quiet now between them. The double windows kept the noises from outside down to a continuous hum.

Kamin wished he hadn't come up with Louis. He didn't want to hear any confession. And there was no point in giving advice to Louis. But he had asked for it.

"You've treated all the people as suckers, Louis. They aren't. Your formula doesn't work out. It's give-and-take, not take-and-take."

"I don't get you."

"Of course you do. There is Trudy."

"What about her?"

"You've never made an effort to help her?"

Louis shrugged. As if he could shrug Trudy off. "There's no sense in being sentimental about things that can't be undone. Trudy doesn't want to come here."

"Did you ever write to her?"

"Why should I write to her?"

You could go on for hours like that. Louis' world and Kamin's world were millions of light-years apart. They weren't talking the same language.

"Trudy is coming over," Kamin now said.

"Trudy? Here—to America?"

"I had a letter from Switzerland. From Fischer. He played goalkeeper on the first class team. He's in Switzerland now. He had a letter from Trudy. She is coming to America as soon as her visa is granted."

"Is old man Matous coming with her?"

"I wouldn't know." There was no sense in talking to Louis. It was too late now.

Louis got up from his chair. He stretched his arms. If there had been a soft shine in his eyes, it had gone. He was taut and hard again, all set for the next performance.

"Thanks for the sermon, old man." He patted Kamin's shoulder. "I guess I'm a lost soul. Come up again and let's have lunch."

"I'm leaving town for a few weeks. I'll stay in Maryland."

"With Jeff Baldwin?"

"I'm going to finish my book there. Britta will join us."

"Britta? Is she coming over with her husband?"

"Didn't you know? She's getting a divorce."

Louis opened his mouth and closed it again. Instinctively, his hands grasped the plate of his desk.

"I didn't know," he said, very softly.

"I had two letters last week. She'll be here in two or three weeks."

Louis took a deep breath. "Will she stay in New York?"

"No. She'll live in Maryland with Carol and Jeff. At least for the beginning."



"At least for the beginning." Louis heard the words a long time after Kamin had gone. He was standing by the window, looking out. Over there, behind those tall buildings, the cloud banks, the eastern horizon was Europe, England, Britta. If you kept looking long enough and sharp enough, you might see her.

Louis had forced himself not to think of Britta. But no matter how hard he tried, she would come back in his dreams, night and day.

It couldn't be love, he said to himself. Love was a big, cheap word, used rather loosely by the writers of poetry, hit tunes and movie scenarios. They would figure out how much love talk there was in a movie and if there was thirty-three per cent or more, it was supposed that the love talk should put it over big with the women. Women were suckers for love talk.

A lot of women had been in love with Louis. But he had always made sure that he wasn't in love with them. It made things so much easier. Perhaps he had never been in love with anybody but himself. It wasn't take-and-take, Kamin had said. It was give-and-take. To love always meant to give oneself away.

I wish I could give everything to Britta, he thought. Myself and everything. It would be give-and-take with her. With Britta, everything would be wonderful . . . with her you wouldn't have to pretend.

Louis took the phone and spoke to his secretary. "Get me Jeff Baldwin, in Maryland, honey," he said to her. Jeff would know when Britta was expected to arrive in New York.

21

SHE HAD BEEN terribly afraid of their first meeting but everything had been all right the moment Kamin came into the sit-

ting room of the New York hotel suite where Britta was staying for a few days with Carol and Jeff.

"Kamin, dear," she'd said, "it's so good to see you again."

There had been no dreadful first moment. He had smiled at her; his eyes had been smiling. "I've been waiting for you," he had said.

Her knees were a little weak when she stood on tiptoe and kissed him. She tried to tell herself, as she had so often done in the past months, that she hadn't done anything wrong to Kamin. They had fallen in love, that night in Paris, but there had been no engagement, no understanding. She had gone back to England; for a variety of reasons, none of which seemed to make the slightest sense now, she had married another man. When she began to realize that she had made a fool out of herself, she began to write to Kamin. You couldn't possibly say that she had acted wrong—or had she?

"It must have been a terrible trip," he said.

"Blackout most of the time," she said. "But one gets used to it."

He looked well in his flannel suit that wasn't freshly pressed; and she had read in his face how well she was looking.

It seemed absurd that one could pick up where one had left off last night—where had it been—on the Boulevard des Capucines?—but that was the way it had turned out. She should have known that everything would be all right with Kamin. He looked unchanged. He looked as if he didn't get enough outdoor exercise; he was always a shade paler than most people around them.

She had wanted to see the town and Kamin had said that the upper deck of a Fifth Avenue bus was the best place to take a look at New York. They were on the first bench on top deck, looking down through the glass in front. She felt his warmth through the sleeve of his coat. She had wondered how he would look against the background of skyscrapers and Lucky Strike ads but he looked as if he had always been there. Kamin seemed perfectly at home everywhere.

She enjoyed the bus ride. It was easier to talk up here, protected by the anonymity of many strange faces, strange streets

and strange buildings. She was annoyed at herself for thinking of Oliver while she was next to Kamin. But he understood. He smiled when she mentioned it.

"I've been waiting for you to tell me—why don't you get it over with?"

There was not much to say. Once there had seemed to be very much but in retrospect it was banal, like a tale which doesn't gain anything by repetition.

Oliver had been the sort of chap W. Somerset Maugham and other English writers have been writing about with great warmth. Well bred and dashing, the family's black sheep, and much more fascinating than the other members of his family. Driving sleek, long Delahayes when everybody else was going by train. Flying to China and Singapore when normal people spent their vacations at Brighton or Monte Carlo. He was always in some trouble, always being blackballed by one of the better clubs, but he told her if she would marry him, he would give her champagne every day for breakfast, and he did.

"What do you drink in the evening when you start out with champagne in the morning?" Kamin asked.

"Yes, that was the problem. There was no logic in anything with Oliver. Like putting the end of a story before the beginning."

Oliver had always been taking things apart but somehow he never managed to put them together again. Once he brought a brand-new motorcycle into the living room and took it apart and then they had to call the man from the garage to put it together. That was the night when they had their first serious fight. Oliver had gone into the game room and got drunk. Next morning she found him lying on the floor, on a soiled copy of the *Daily Telegraph* next to the motorcycle. When she told him to get up, he shouted at her and then beat her up.

"Don't be so shocked, Kamin dear. Some of our very best people are beating up their wives. Of course, Oliver came back and said he was frightfully sorry but by that time I didn't care any more. Oliver's fascination had become as stale as the morning champagne after you let it stand around for an hour. He

would bring his friends home and they would treat me as if I were a piece of furniture."

It was a competition she couldn't stand up against. If it had been another woman, that would have been easy. She discovered that Oliver was really happy only in the company of other men, drinking, swearing, golfing, hunting.

"We finally decided to call it a day," she said. It was all said now and Kamin was still next to her. When the bus reached Washington Square and everybody got out, they remained sitting there and after a while the conductor came by again, Kamin pressed two coins into the little machine and they were all set for the uptown ride.

Kamin didn't say anything. He looked out of the window. She couldn't imagine what he was thinking about. She wondered whether he was hurt.

"When is your divorce going to come through?" he said, and then she knew what he'd been thinking about.

"In two months, I hope. Our courts are crowded with divorce cases. My solicitor thinks everything will be all right."

"I hope so," he said, and that was all. It was better that way. Time would take care of the rest, as they always said in sermons.

They went back to the hotel just off Park Avenue. Carol and Jeff were out but they had left a message that they would be back for dinner. They went up to Jeff's suite and sat down in the old-fashioned sitting room and had drinks.

"If I had known that things have worked out so well with Carol and Jeff, I would have made an effort to come over sooner," she said. "I was a little afraid to meet Jeff."

"He was very fond of you."

"I think he's terribly in love with Carol. He hasn't discovered it yet. But he will, some day, and they'll both be very happy."

She said she had been afraid on the trip coming over on the boat. It was terrible lying below deck, and realizing the thinness of the ship's hull.

"You should have let me know that you were coming," he said. "I'd have loved to be at the pier."

"I thought of it, but then I was glad you weren't there. Somebody else had come to greet me and it didn't make me very happy."

"Louis?"

"Of course."

"You didn't write him you were arriving?"

"Of course not, dear," she said. She was really quite happy seeing him annoyed. Sometimes his casual manner was too much even for her. "He phoned Jeff and Jeff was silly enough to tell him."

Louis had been waiting for her, carrying flowers. The other passengers, mostly children and refugee women, had looked at the flower bouquet as people in a tenement would look at a woman's mink coat. Jeff had planned to drive back to Maryland right away, but Louis insisted on taking them for dinner to a dimly lit, deeply carpeted restaurant where the waiters looked and talked exactly as in one of the better places in Soho. Britta was appalled by the amount of food that was left on the plates by the other people. Louis said that in a little time she would get used to it. Jeff got tight and Louis took her on the dance floor and started to propose to her, in a great hurry.

"I'm sure you were flattered," Kamin said.

"Every girl is flattered by proposals," she said.

She had tried to brush off Louis but he had been unperturbed until she said, "I'm sorry, but there is no sense in all this, Louis. I wish you would understand that there can never be anything between us."

He had been quite upset and left. She called up Carol and Carol told her what to do with Jeff—it appeared there was a concoction that would make him snap out of it—and they had got into the car. Jeff was driving best when he wasn't entirely sober.

"And that's the last I hope to see of your friend, Louis."

"Well, we ought to credit him with one thing."

"What's that?"

"I wouldn't have met you, darling, if it hadn't been for him."

22

THE PHONE was ringing. "Mrs. Sherwood on number four," the secretary said.

"Mr. Sherwood?" Louis said.

"Mrs. Sherwood," the secretary repeated. "She's called twice already. I told her you were out to lunch."

"All right," Louis said. He waited until he heard the click in the line. Katherine said, "Are you there, Louis? I've been calling you all noon. I wanted you to take me to lunch."

"I had to go out with a client."

"There's always a client," she said. Her voice annoyed him.

"Look, Katherine, I told you not to call me at the office. Suppose Jim——?"

"Suppose I don't care what Jim thinks? You should know that by now."

"You're being silly."

"I don't care at all," she said and her voice was getting high-pitched. "I've *got* to see you. I've been trying to see you for *days*."

"Look darling, I have a meeting and——"

"You're having a lot of meetings nowadays. And dinner engagements. With one of your clients, no doubt? That blonde one. The Cinderella Love Course girl. You looked swell in the picture with her they took at the Bistro. I saw it in Alexis Souvarov's column."

Louis sighed. His affair with Katherine Sherwood had turned out to be agony on the installment plan. He had been wrong about her. He had been attracted by her smart-as-a-whip trim body, the challenge in her cold, dark eyes. Surely this smart woman would understand the points of the bargain: a few hours of fun and no hard feelings.

But there had been little fun. Mostly there had been torture. Katherine was desperate, frustrated, deeply unhappy. She would accuse herself, her husband, Louis, her children, everybody for having made a mess of her life. Sometimes she would break away from Louis while she was in his arms. She would start to cry, in a depressing, silent way; nothing could make her stop. And all the time she would talk, talk, talk. "If you only knew what I have to go through to keep this a secret! You don't know Jim! He's watching me."

"I didn't know he cared. He didn't think of you when he was in Europe."

She broke into tears. "He doesn't love me. But he's vain. All men are vain. I hate him! I hate you! All of you!"

Then she would start again. "He watches me even at night. I'm terrified to betray myself in my sleep."

Now she was even calling him at the office.

"I'm coming up right away, Louis. I'm in town."

"You can't come up here!"

She said pointedly, "You can't stop the wife of the president from coming to the office!"

He would have to be tough with her. "Katherine," he said. "I'm leaving now."

"No, you won't. You'll wait until I——"

He put down the receiver, took his hat and went through the anteroom. The secretary was putting down the phone.

"Mr. Sherwood wants to see you."

"Call him back, honey. Tell him I've just left."

He breathed easier when he was out on the street. The room was still unmade when he came back to his hotel. He lay down on the open bed in his suit and shoes. He had brought home the afternoon papers and this morning's *Times* was still on the floor. All the papers carried gigantic headlines. This was the first winter of the war.

A picture in one of the afternoon papers caught his eye. A woman in a tight, low-cut, black evening gown, one leg thrust forward. Still the best-leg-forward trick. She'd always done it in *La Belle Hélène*. She had her hair done up now which brought out her high cheekbones. Even the bad half-tone re-

production couldn't conceal her plain sexiness. She was standing in front of the Berlin UFA palace, surrounded by a group of prominent black-shirt gorillas.

The caption said:

MARION MARA, German stage and screen star, at the opening of the new documentary *The Blitz To End All Blitzkriegs* that was done under her supervision. "I'm proud of the sixty-four men who have died on the battlefields gathering the material for this picture," Marion Mara said in a speech which was warmly applauded by many political and military leaders.

There was a story on Marion Mara's "cometlike career": her beginnings in "small provincial theaters," her affairs with Nazi big shots, her legendary power-behind-the-bedrooms. Before the war, two American motion picture studios had made her tempting offers to come to Hollywood. She had been decorated by the Führer with the Ritterkreuz with Oak Leaves for her "singular" achievements.

Marion Mara looked exciting in the picture. More desirable than the night in his father's room. Louis threw the paper away and closed his eyes. He could almost hear her throaty laughter, feel the play of her fingers. . . .

He didn't like to think of Marion Mara. He didn't like to think of any of them. Their names kept coming back to his mind, in overlapping circles, Britta—Trudy—Marion—Katherine—Britta—Britta—and no matter how the circles spiraled back and forth, Britta's name was always coming back. *There is no sense in all this, Louis. I wish you would understand that there can never be anything between us.*

He took the phone and asked for Claire's number. He had to wait. It was always more difficult to talk to Claire than to get through to the President at the White House.

"Claire? This is Louis, dear."

"Well, well, well. You're all out of breath."

Her voice had a slightly ironic inflection—Claire's idea of sounding smart. He wondered whether she was pleased with

his call. He knew nothing about Claire. They had spent a few evenings together, dancing at the Bistro, or sitting at Alexis' table. He had never been alone with her.

"What are you doing tonight?" he said. And without waiting for her answer, "Can I see you?"

"Isn't this awfully short notice?"

"Look, Claire, I've got to see you. Don't ask any questions."

Perhaps she understood the urgency in his voice. "All right. Where?"

"Suppose I pick you up at your apartment?"

Again there was a slight pause as if she couldn't make up her mind. "Nine o'clock?" she said at last.

"Swell," he said. "See you at nine, Claire."

He lay back and closed his eyes, and then he asked for Nikki's room. "Sorry, Nikki, but I can't see you tonight. An urgent meeting at the office. I'll give you a ring tomorrow. . . ."

He poured himself a drink and lay down again. He felt relaxed now. The newspaper with Marion Mara's picture was crumpled on the floor. His thoughts of Trudy and Katherine Sherwood were crumpled somewhere underneath. Filed away, under To Be Forgotten.

Britta was still with him. Much as he had tried, he couldn't file her away. But perhaps Claire would fix that.

23

CLAIRE SHERATON's apartment was in the East Seventies. It had been decorated by a famous Austrian designer of the Hoffman School, as befits a successful career woman. The Austrian had been a gloomy man with a pessimistic outlook on life. He liked to recite long, inscrutable passages from Schopenhauer. The Austrian's favorite thesis was that people should learn to live

in dwellings resembling tombs, crypts and mausoleums so that they could prepare themselves, spiritually and physically, for their departure into the beyond while they were yet alive.

The living room was big and looked more like a dying room. It was done in a seasick mauve color, with bare walls which were lined at the bottom and the ceiling with broad, pitch-black panels. The furniture combined functional with nightmarish features. At any time one expected to fall out of a chair, be crushed by a table or roll under the low couch. There was not a single comfortable place to sit down. Most people preferred to lie down on the floor, on the soft dark-red rug, which was exactly what the decorator had intended.

"People should be close to the earth, in a horizontal position," he would say. "The Chinese and Tibetans, the wisest people in the world, live close to the earth."

The dining room had a table at which people could sit down for their meals. This was one of the rare concessions which the interior decorator had made to the foolish whims of Western civilization. The bedroom looked like a miniature replica of the Towers of Silence in Bombay. There was an enormous bed resembling a catafalque. The lights came out from under and were reflected by a large mirror fastened to the ceiling. Making love on this bed would be a weird, strangely exciting ritual, like dancing at voodoo funerals.

The living room had a large rounded window; one corner was dominated by a Steinway grand. Claire didn't play the piano, she didn't even like to listen to it, but you had to have a piano, and occasionally a famous pianist would come up and play. The keyboard would always be uncovered, the ivories lying obscenely bare, with two crystal-glass candlesticks turned on.

It had to remain uncovered. The uncovered piano was a childhood fixation of Claire's. Back home in the small town in Texas where she had lived with her father in a big, empty house the piano had always remained uncovered. Once Paulette, her girl friend, had closed it and when Claire had tried to lift the cover, it fell down and broke her middle finger. A few years ago she had consulted a psychiatrist who, in due course, estab-

lished the fact that Claire had been violently in love with her father, a widower, and that she had once surprised her father in bed with her girl friend Paulette, a voluptuous fifteen-year-old brunette who had looked twenty-five in her sweater. The psychiatrist sent her his bill but Claire still couldn't bear to have the piano closed.

She was lying on the couch now, smoking a cigarette. Her drink was below her, on the floor. Louis was stretched out on the floor, his head on the couch, near her lap. The lights were turned down. It was very quiet in the apartment, almost as quiet as in a grave. The Austrian interior decorator would have loved it. Sometimes there was the faint noise of a car going by, and in some distant part of the house a door was slammed shut, and then the quiet settled down again, thick and tangible like dense fog, shutting off the outside world, creating intimacy and the feeling of being all alone.

Claire's fingers were playing with Louis' hair. She was strangely excited by his nearness in the dim, quiet room. They had listened to music, drinking and talking, and now she was lying, her eyes half-closed, feeling his nearness, his warmth. There was something strangely suggestive in Louis' voice, the singsong of his accent, the way he moved his hands; his hair, brushed in casual disorder across his temples. Something that made her mind wander back to one night on Santa Monica beach, overlooking the swishing, swirling darkness that had been the Pacific Ocean. . . .

Claire had gone to Hollywood when she was nineteen, fresh out of school. Her father had owned the only movie house in town and was supposed to have "contacts" in Hollywood, and Claire's girl friends had always expected her to wind up in the movie capital. She had no acting ability and did not expect to get a job in the movies, but a friend of her father's owned a small hotel in a side street of Hollywood Boulevard and suggested, to pay back an old loan to her father, letting Claire stay in his hotel free of charge until the loan was paid off.

The people in Hollywood reminded her of the Saturday night customers at her father's movie theater in the small Texas town. The women had on mink coats over their pajamas, and

the men wore their shirts outside their pants. Nothing else was really different. The glaring sunshine was whiter than in Texas; the restaurants had the shapes of Disney hats, derbies, giant cones and tropical huts. The movie theaters looked like churches; and in the churches they ran movies.

One night she had gone to have dinner at a restaurant that was very dark and very crowded. The headwaiter asked her whether she had a reservation. She shook her head. He glanced at her, her beige tailored costume, her high-heeled snake shoes, her very handsome legs, and then he smiled at her and said, "Please, wait at the bar. We'll have a table in no time."

She sat down and ordered a dry martini. The bar was even darker than the rest of the place. She heard a man's voice out of the darkness.

"You must be a stranger in town," he said and smiled. He had an undefinable accent.

She nodded and sipped her drink.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to promise to get you a job in the movies," he said. "Matter of fact, I need one myself."

She turned toward him. He had a sharp profile, a little like her father, only younger. They started to talk and wound up having dinner together, and after dinner, Geza took her for a ride to the ocean. He said he'd been in Hollywood for the past seven years.

"I could have bought the whole valley for fifty bucks," he said.

"The valley?"

"San Fernando Valley. When I came here, there were ten people living there and those ten wanted to get out. I could be a millionaire today."

He told her that he had been doing stuff for the movies. Stories. He pronounced it "*Stoaries*," in his singsong voice.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"Hungary. In the good old days, it was enough to speak Hungarian to get a job in the movies. Now everybody speaks English."

He was the first foreigner she had ever met. After dinner he drove her out to the Santa Monica beach. He parked the car on

top of the cliff and they got out and walked across the sand into the darkness, from where the smells of seaweed came. It was the first time she had been at the ocean at night. He kissed her hand, first the back, and then the palm. Her heart was beating. She withdrew her hand.

"When are you going back?" he asked.

"I should go back by the end of the week," she said.

But she didn't.

She spent every evening with him. On the sixth evening—that was another day she would never forget—he took her to his place. He had two small rooms off Santa Monica Boulevard, in a dreary, half-industrialized area, the windows looking out on the parking lot of a California Super Market, the streetcar tracks and a little hut with a painted sign, ICE. The rooms looked like cells in a Spanish-Moorish-Arabian dungeon. The rug was covered with stains and the wallpaper was marked with pencil marks and torn in places so that the newspaper illustrations from *The American Weekly* underneath showed through.

It was a long way from the glamorous settings of movie romances, and slick magazine stories, which would take the hero and the heroine to Tahiti, Manhattan penthouses, Waikiki Beach, with music coming from the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, but there she lived through three delirious days and nights. They didn't even go out for dinner. Geza had a small electric range and made cheese blintzes, *Töltöt Kaposzta*, stuffed cabbage, for her.

On the morning of the third day he got a cable from Buenos Aires. A new motion picture firm with Argentine capital, American equipment and Hungarian producers offered him a job. He said he was going to be back in two months.

* * *

"He never came back?" Louis asked. He was still lying with his head near her lap, rubbing his cheek against her thigh.

She shook her head.

He kept staring at her legs. Her skirt was way up. She had

very good legs. They all had good legs. Maybe the healthy food and plenty of outdoor exercise had something to do with it.

"Men are such fools," he said sententiously. "I wouldn't have left you, darling."

She didn't answer. She exhaled nervously as though she were doing it for a close-up before a movie camera.

"And then?" he asked.

"I went to New York. Started to work. Anything to keep busy." Anything to forget Geza. There had been other men but for one reason or another they merely left her with a renewed sense of frustration. She didn't quite understand herself. They were successful, good-looking, nice young men. But she didn't click with them. Something always went wrong. She began to worry whether the trouble might be with her. But that was nonsense, of course. She had been perfectly happy with Geza during those three days and nights.

Evidently, the trouble was with the men. They weren't so tender, patient, passionate, as Geza had been. Most of the men happened to come from the Midwest or from New England. Claire began to wonder whether she shouldn't shop around among the Continentals for a man who would be more of a substitute for Geza.

She didn't want to admit to herself that Louis had become more than a substitute. In the beginning she had been attracted by him because he reminded her so much of Geza. Always a little bit too carefully dressed. His complete lack of casualness. His preoccupation with food and wine. The changed inflection in his voice when he was talking to her alone. The way he danced. He danced almost as well as Geza and he wore his evening clothes a great deal better.

Once she had asked Louis, "Where are you from?" and he had said, "Oh, I've been around. Everywhere a little while and nowhere too long."

He was rubbing his lips inside her elbow.

"Don't," she said, perfunctorily. He bent over her head, which was at the edge of the couch, and kissed her lips. She struggled a little, but after a few seconds she put her arms

around his neck. She was still a little afraid of him, which pleased him enormously.

Abruptly, she pushed him away and sat up, rubbing her eyes as if she had just been waked up from a deep sleep.

"Please, Louis, you must leave now. *Please go.*"

She had been in such situations before. The men with her had always grown red in the face, with anger or embarrassment, depending on their manners, their temperament and the things their mothers had told them. Afterwards there would be a messy scene and the whole thing would leave her with a bad aftertaste.

Louis didn't grow red in the face; he didn't start a scene. He didn't try to break her collar bone, like that tweedy ex-University-of-Illinois tackle. He acted just as Geza would have acted. He smiled at her, a nice, warm smile. You can rely on *those* people, Claire said to herself; they have class. Her young men from the Middle West and New England had lacked class and the sort of manners Claire expected at a moment like this. She became aware that she was putting Louis and Geza far above her young men from the Middle West and New England, and being a good American, she grew vaguely uncomfortable, as if she were committing a slight case of high treason.

"I'm sorry, dear," he said and he jumped up. He didn't drag himself up like the Illinois tackle. "You don't really want me to go." He shook his head, smiling at her until she could do nothing but also smile. "I don't really want to go, but I guess I'll have to."

She was still crouched on the couch. She was sorry he was leaving. She wished there were a way out for a respectable young woman to tell him to stay, *please* stay, but evidently this situation had never been taught in her Cinderella Charm Course. She knew she wouldn't be able to get any sleep tonight, with that crazy bang-bang-bang in her pulses, and she wished she were able to remember the clever lines which the women in Noel Coward drawing rooms would always say in such moments, but her mind was a dense fog.

"Good night, darling," he said, and kissed her. On the eyes. "It was a wonderful evening." Then he was gone.

In the taxicab Louis opened both windows. The night was stifling hot but as the taxi turned into Fifth Avenue and drove down past Central Park, Louis felt a cool draft. He was seeing everything in focus now. The small-town girl who made a success in the big town by telling other small-town girls how to wrap every man around their little fingers. Poor Claire, how she herself would love to be wrapped around his little finger!

It was three-fifteen, but he wasn't sleepy. His room was sticky. The bedsheets were warm. He took off all his clothes and lay down but after a while he sat up and propped his neck against the cool headboard. The vision of Claire lying there on her catafalque excited his phantasy. He could see her lying there, her legs spread out in different directions. . . .

He took the phone and gave the operator Claire's number, a Butterfield number. It fitted in perfectly with her address, the white leather chairs, the uncomfortable furniture, the little refrigerator built in behind the bar. All the appearances were right. That was one thing he liked about Claire. They both wanted the same things from life though perhaps they were not quite sure exactly what they wanted. Meeting the right people, being seen at the right places, saying the right things, talking about the right books even if you hadn't read them. The delicious sensation of walking through a restaurant when everybody was looking after you.

He heard her phone ring three times, four times. Could it be that she'd gone to sleep? Then he heard a clicking sound.

"Yes?" Her voice had a drowsy quality but she hadn't been asleep. He knew it.

"Darling, did I wake you up?"

"Louis!" She was annoyed. Perhaps she only sounded that way.

"I *had* to call you, Claire dear. I had to hear your voice before going off on a dream." Louis pressed his lips to the mouth-piece. It was a trick he'd learned from torch singers. Gave your voice the soft, deliriously intimate touch, that deep-out-of-the-throat, down-the-spine feeling. So much would depend on his voice in this new experiment.

Since his failure with Britta, Louis' self-confidence had been

severely shaken. Claire was his chance to prove himself. He felt the excitement to the very tips of his fingers. His hand holding the receiver was wet. It was like stage fright, just before the curtain went up.

"You should be in bed, Louis."

"I am. That's what made me think of you."

For a moment she was quiet; then she said, "Well—good night, Louis."

"Where are you now, Claire?"

"In bed."

"Are the lights on?"

"Yes."

"And reflected by the mirror above?"

"Uh-huh."

"I wish you'd send me that mirror, with your picture in it."

"I couldn't," she said and laughed. "I never wear anything at night."

"That's why I want to see you!"

"Louis! !"

She gave a sigh. America's leading expert on *The Secrets of Feminine Charm, How to Wrap Your Man Around Your Little Finger*, was deeply, puritanically shocked to the depths of her small-town soul. "I must go to sleep now, Louis. Try to get some sleep, too."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"Something happened to us, Claire. Don't try to deny it. I am still holding you close, feeling you."

"Louis! You are crazy."

"I'm crazy about you, Claire."

He enjoyed this new experiment, sex by wire transmission. He hadn't had so much fun in ages.

"You're out of your mind," she said. She was on the defensive.

"I shouldn't have left you, Claire. I should have taken you into my arms and carried you over to the bedroom and——"

"No, no, *no!* !"

Don't let her get her breath back. Stay in there punching hard and fast.

"Close your eyes, darling. Keep them closed. Can you feel me, Claire? Am I near you?"

"Louis! !"

His lips tasted salty. Drops of perspiration trickled down his cheeks. He was carried away by his vision. If he closed his eyes and listened to her voice, the irresponsible little sounds coming out of her throat toward him all the way through the phone, he could really see her now.

"Let's stop pretending, Claire," he said. He spoke fast. When he spoke fast, he was never sure whether the people understood him but if she didn't understand his words, she would well know the meaning. "I've known it ever since I saw you that evening at the Bistro. You were wearing that trim black suit but you might as well have worn a cellophane suit. Dancing with you, holding you in my arms. I wanted you right then, Claire!"

He kept off-staging her, talking fast. "I felt it tonight when I kissed you. You were just as hungry for me as I was for you——"

She could never back out of that. He had slowly, surely maneuvered her into his own corner and kept punching hard. "You stay where you are. I'll jump in a taxi and be there in a minute. Don't move, darling. Don't move——"

There was no answer. Louis pressed down the handle of the phone, interrupting the connection. Everything was a matter of timing now. He waited for a moment to be sure the connection was cut, and clicked the handle twice with his finger.

"Number please?" the operator said. Her sleepy voice brought him back to reality.

"Operator, get me the desk, please——"

"Anything wrong, sir?"

The sleepy voice seemed to snap out of it. Damn it, he was all breathless. He cleared his throat.

"Wait, operator. Call the desk for me, will you? Tell them to get me a taxi. I'll be down in three minutes. . . ."

He got dressed, without bothering to button his shirt under the tie. Down through the lobby, into the taxi. Hurry up man, this is an emergency! Paying the cabbie, up into the elevator. The slightly surprised look of the old elevator operator. "I forgot something upstairs." Once a gentleman, always a gentleman. Ringing her bell. Once, twice. She must have been waiting for him in the hall. She couldn't have come out of the bedroom so quickly.

"Who's there?"

"Hurry up, Claire darling. Open, please——"

"Louis! It's madness. I won't open. You go right back and——"

That was the trouble with women. They don't respect the rules. They never know when they are beaten. He placed his lips close to the door.

"Open up, Claire, or I'll wake up everybody——"

The door seemed to be moving back, as if pulled in by an invisible force. Just half an inch, but half an inch was all he needed. He slipped through like an eel, reached out into the blackness and caught her. It was a remarkable feat of instinct, he said to himself as he felt her body, drew her close and kissed her hard. She was struggling feebly, probably saying something, but from here on, he knew his lines by heart.

* * *

The letter from Prague arrived one afternoon. Jim Sherwood opened it, his hands trembling. The letter was typed in English. It was signed by a man who introduced himself as Mr. Vojta Fajfrlik, Vlasta's new husband.

The letter was distinguished by clarity of style and dispensed with the conventional ornaments of affection. Frankly, Mr. Fajfrlik wrote, he was disappointed in Mr. Sherwood. From what Vlasta had told him before their marriage, Mr. Fajfrlik had been under the impression that Mr. Sherwood was a gentleman. A gentleman was supposed to understand when something was finished, all over, terminated, closed, ended, dead.

Jim Sherwood walked over to his sixteenth-century cabinet

and had a couple of drinks, straight Kentucky Bourbon seven and a half years old. He wasn't heartbroken, which came as a surprise to him. He was good and mad about Louis. Those damned letters had made Jim Sherwood a ridiculous figure.

Louis stared at Mr. Fajfrlik's letter. "I can't understand it," he said. "I guess he never gave her my letters. They would have changed her mind. They were great love letters."

Jim was his old self again, in his favorite reclining position behind his desk.

"Well," he said. "I guess the jig is up, Louis."

"Some day you're going to go back there and then——"

"I was thinking of *you*." Jim Sherwood looked like Uncle Sam on the Montgomery Flagg poster as he stuck out his finger. "I'm afraid the Harry W. Overstreet Associates will have to accept your immediate resignation."

Louis didn't answer.

"The upstate campaign was a complete flop. Here are the figures." Jim Sherwood was almost inaudible. "And I spoke to Mrs. Brown two days ago. She told me a few things about your dealings with her. You are through, Louis."

Sherwood got up. "You'll get your final check in the mail. We are paying you one week's salary for each month you've been with us."

By the time Louis was ready to leave his office, everybody seemed to be in on the conspiracy against him: the freckled mail clerk who had already taken off Louis' name card from the pigeonhole; the switchboard operator. His secretary had a small cream jar in her hand and tapped her middle finger against the skin around her eyes. She wasn't even aware of his presence.

"Some day you will discover that all the other people aren't suckers as you thought," Kamin had said. Kamin had been right.

Louis was tired. In the past months he had slept badly. He was having a strange nightmare, always the same nightmare. He was standing on an icy slope. He tried to walk up the slope but he began to slide. Soon he was down on his hands and knees. He could feel the cold ice. The tips of his fingers hurt

and the blood came out from under the nails. He was sliding down, as much as he tried to hold himself. The ice was too smooth. When he woke up, shivering, he saw that the blanket had fallen down from his bed. . . .

He walked over to the window. There was the giant wall that was Rockefeller Center. The lights were going on and off, like on the switchboard of a big railroad station. Something had happened to his train. His train was late. Perhaps it would never arrive.

Louis turned his back to the giant switchboard and walked over to the telephone. Just one last call before he left the office for good. He asked the operator for Claire's number.

24

Louis' contribution to his marriage with Claire Sheraton was to change his name from Delinc to De Linc, dropping the hyphen and the "Matous" altogether.

Claire was delighted. Any girl could marry money, if she wasn't too choosy about the way it had been acquired, but where did you find an aristocratic name that went back to Charles VIII?

"Not Charles VIII," Louis said casually. "Charles VII, darling. He elevated the De Lincs to nobility in 1429, after he'd been crowned by Joan of Arc."

"Why did you call yourself Delinc when you came here?"

Louis had anticipated the question. "This is no place to show off, darling," he said with modesty. "This is a *democracy*." He sounded as if he had discovered the word.

She pressed his arm. "I'm so proud of you, dear. And—of the name."

It had begun to rain. The windshield wiper of Claire's car was swishing "Claire de Linc," "Claire de Linc." They had

gone to a small town in New Jersey for a perfunctory wedding ceremony, in order to avoid the minor unpleasantnesses of Wasserman tests in Manhattan. Fortunately the wife of the city clerk had been a subscriber to the Cinderella Correspondence Course. She was so awed by Claire's presence that she was nervously biting her lower lip, disregarding the instructions of Letter No. 11, Lip Loveliness, How to Make Thin Lips Fuller.

The windshield wiper was swishing. Louis leaned back in his seat. He let Claire drive. He was very satisfied with himself. Claire had been a cinch. He had proposed to her last night, right here in her car. He wasn't sure whether she was in love with him or with his new name but, frankly, he didn't care. His financial problems were settled for the moment. America was a paradise where women suckers were growing like weeds.

Mrs. H. S. Brown read the news of Louis' marriage that afternoon in Alexis Souvarov's column.

"Thank God," she said to Nikki. "I was afraid that phoney might get you."

Nikki was crying. "I don't care what he is. I love him."

"At your age," the old woman said, "one comes rapidly to similar conclusions. You'll get over it."

"Never, *grand'mère*, never."

Mrs. Brown didn't say anything. She had lived in this country for many years but sometimes Americans baffled her. How anybody in her right mind could fall for that "De Linc" business, was beyond her. But then she remembered that Americans like to import old castles from Europe, which were taken apart, crated, shipped over, disinfected, and rebuilt on good American soil.

* * *

It was one hell of a party. Having been tipped off by Louis about Louis' and his bride's return from their three-day honeymoon in Vermont, Alexis Souvarov had decided to throw a surprise party for the happy couple in Claire's macabre apartment. By midnight many guests weren't able to think or to walk, straight or otherwise. They were everywhere, on the

catafalque in Claire's bedroom, under the dining-room table, on the floors. Even Miss Littlejohn, who lectured at Claire's Charm School on "Etiquette in a Capsule," How To Avoid Embarrassing Moments, had quietly passed out in the bathtub.

In the kitchen, Anatol, the famed French chef of the Bistro, made his Wedding Soufflé Marianne. Alexis Souvarov had thought of everything. There were two waiters from the Bistro and Alexis' secretary sat on the floor in a corner and handled the incoming phone calls.

"Sure, sure," she would say. "Come right up. Party's in full swing."

Colonel Briggs sat in one of the modernistic chairs, his long legs stretched out, crying into his highball.

"You shouldn't have done this to me, Claire," he soliloquized. "What am I going to tell mama? I told mama I was going to marry Claire."

"You may marry her yet," Alexis said quizzically.

"When? Now?"

"Not now," said Alexis. "Give her time, man."

Colonel Briggs stared at the columnist out of big watery eyes, took another swallow of his drink and tried to get out of his chair which was built like an octopus. The chair kept him prisoner and the colonel quietly passed out.

Christine Waters came in after midnight. She wore a white ermine coat and looked twenty years younger than her age which was forty plus. She kissed Claire on the mouth.

"Darling," she said, making it sound like "Daaahling." "I'm *so* happy for you. Where is he? Where's the wonder man who took you away from me?"

She put her hand around Claire's shoulder, under her arm-pit, and they walked over to the piano where Louis was sitting with a group of people. They pretended to be his very best friends though he had never met them until tonight. Perhaps they were Claire's friends, or people the Salvation Army had sent up for supper. They couldn't be his friends. He hadn't any.

"Louis darling," Claire was saying, "I want you to meet my very dearest friend, Christine Waters."

Louis found himself looking into Christine's dark eyes. Dark and irritating.

Claire said, "Christine made my success possible."

Louis remembered vaguely that Claire had spoken of a very rich woman, who had financed her when Claire came to New York and wanted to open her Charm School. He had not paid much attention to Claire's talk. He was beginning to get irritated by the shrill staccato sound of her voice.

Christine Waters had at various stages of her life been called a deb, an heiress, and a divorcée. The adjectives were always the same: "rich" and "attractive." They didn't quite do her justice. Christine's black hair, parted in the middle, took on a thrilling shade of electric-blue under artificial lights. About her face, long, white, straight, a friend of a friend of a pupil of Picasso's had once said, "An Oriental Madonna." In addition, she had a beautiful body.

When she had been sixteen, she had eloped with a Greyhound bus driver. Her father organized a nationwide search. After a few weeks, Christine came back home by herself. She had discovered that her husband had a girl at every rest stop.

Her father summoned his first team of lawyers and told them to have Christine's marriage annulled. "The child couldn't possibly have known what she was doing."

"Oh, yes, I did and I enjoyed it, too," said Christine.

Her second husband was a broken-down English lord, and her third a movie actor. "Poor Christine, she scrapes the bottom of the barrel," said some of the actor's best friends in Hollywood.

Her full legal name was Christine Waters O'Hara (the Greyhound bus driver) Perckel-Lyttelton (the lord) Graham (the actor), but in the intervals between marriages she modestly called herself plain Christine Waters. Her only real fear was that she would die some day of acute boredom, and she was always ready to try something new. When Claire told Christine about her new terrific idea—Cinderella's Magic Touch For

Every American Woman—Christine offered at once to finance her.

Claire made a hit from the very beginning. Several midtown stores hired her to train their sales staffs after Claire had sold her idea to the executives. She became an adviser on women's problems to a large press association. She began to advertise her Cinderella Course nationally. Among the letters which were printed in her advertisements, many said, "I've had four proposals of marriage since I studied your Cinderella Course. I feel like a new person." It was never said in the ads whether any of the marriage proposals had actually worked out.

The Cinderella Course branched out into a full-fledged Charm School. Claire opened courses for feminine personality (Overcome Your Self-Consciousness; Learn the Secrets of Conversation; What Makes Your Voice Pleasing). There were courses for Charm and Allure (How to Acquire a Lovelier Face; The Real Charm of Helen Hayes; What Do Men Seek In You?).

Women wrote to her from all over the country. Claire received hundreds of letters a day. To answer them she dictated a booklet, "My Cinderella Magic," which gave away "a thousand and one secrets" about kissable lips, beautified breasts, calorie charts for reducing, languorous eyes, and How to Look Like the Duchess of Windsor on a Very Limited Budget.

She had given up worrying about her men; she was too busy telling other women not to worry about *their* men. She spent her week-ends in Christine Waters' big house on Long Island. There were always too many people and too many drinks.

One night Claire was already in bed when Christine came into the room. It was very hot. Christine took off her black silk dressing gown, under which she had on nothing. "I'm so restless, darling," Christine said. "I don't know what is the matter with me. I simply can't sleep."

She lay down beside Claire. Soon she began to kiss her. Claire watched herself with cool, clinical detachment. She felt a great pity for Christine. She didn't like this thing at all but she forced herself to endure Christine as she had forced herself, in earlier years, to smoke her first cigarette, to read a much-

discussed book, to sleep with a boy. Although she was now a famous authority on smartness, underneath there was still the deep, dark fear of appearing dull, provincial, homespun. She stayed with Christine all night long, but she never came back to her place for a week-end. . . .

"A woman like you, Christine, should be told three times a day how desirable she is."

She laughed and sipped her drink. They were sitting on the floor of Claire's bedroom. Christine was propped up against the catafalque, her long legs stretched across Louis' lap.

"Three times a day?"

"At the blue hour. Then, at dinner, and late at night."

"Louis," Christine said. "You wouldn't be making a pass at me, by any chance?"

"Why didn't we meet before?"

"Before *when*?" He was silent and she said, "Come on, Louis. Before when?"

"All right," he said. "Before I got married."

She withdrew her legs from his lap.

"I am a very close friend of Claire's, Louis."

"What of it?"

She rubbed her upper lip against her glass. "Your timing is wrong, my friend."

Then they heard Alexis. "Well, here you are. Been looking for you everywhere. Louis, you've got visitors."

Louis looked up. "Nikki!" He jumped up from the floor.

"I'm glad that you came, Nikki. I wanted to call you. But you know how it is."

Nikki shook her head. "I brought her over, Louis. She was sitting in the hotel lobby waiting for you. The clerk said she'd been sitting there all evening."

"Who?"

"Hello, Louis," a voice said.

He turned around and saw Trudy. Trudy Matous, his first wife. She looked much thinner than he remembered her. Her gray tailored suit was creased. Her hair had no sheen and hung down in ugly strings, as if she'd been walking in the rain.

"Trudy!!"

His debonair air seemed to collapse under his bewilderment. The voices of the people in the living room, a French song played by Joubert on the piano, the slightly mocking stare of Christine, still down there on the floor, the quizzical expression on Claire's face—everything seemed to blend into an incongruous pattern, without shape or form, like in a bad dream. It couldn't be true.

"Hello, Louis," Trudy said, with an effort at a smile. He heard the utter hopelessness in her voice, a flat, monotonous, tired voice, next to Claire's high-pitched clarinet staccato and Christine's throaty laughter. And then he knew that this wasn't a figment of his imagination.

"Trudy! I had no idea that——"

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Alexis shouted. "There will be a slight pause for identification——"

The piano-player was singing

*Elle avait deux tout petit pétons,
Valentine, Valentine . . .*

imitating the enunciation of Maurice Chevalier. Everything seemed to be blurred in front of Louis' eyes.

"Excuse us," he said. "We'll be—back—in a minute."

He took Trudy's arm, pushed her through the crowd, out into the hall. They bumped into a couple on the floor in the hall. The kitchen was full of drunken people. Then he remembered the small servant's room at the end of the hall. He opened the door. A bed, a chair, a wash basin. The smell of freshly laundered sheets.

"Why didn't you let me know that you were coming? Why didn't you send me a cable?"

She sat down at the edge of the bed. She looked terribly tired.

"I came on a British freighter. We had radio silence. There's a war on."

He became uncontrollably furious at the reproachful sound of her voice. "I know there's a war on."

She shrugged. "I didn't even know where you lived."

"How did you find me?"

"I started with the big hotels. You always liked the expensive places, Louis."

He hated her so much he could have hit her.

"It took me six hours," she said. "I didn't know you went under Delinc-Matous."

"It's not my name any more," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He sighed. He realized the absurdity of this situation. This was terrible timing. It was almost melodramatic.

"Let's talk of you," he said. "Are you alone?"

"With whom should I be?"

"Your father? Didn't he come with you?"

"No. They wouldn't let him out."

He breathed with relief. That was good news, at least. He could handle Trudy all right. Old Matous would have been a different story.

"Louis," she was saying, "which one is your wife? The one sitting on the floor, with the black hair parted in the middle?"

"No, no," he said angrily.

She stared at him. "You look almost as unhappy as you were when you married me. You didn't even say hello to me!"

He turned his back to her. "Trudy, for God's sake, I thought we'd got over that."

"Yes," she said. "I guess we did."

Oh my God, he thought. He should feel sorry for her but he couldn't.

"I won't be long," she said. "I only came to settle our business affairs."

"All right. What is it?"

"The money."

"What money?"

"You have my father's money, Louis. I need it. I couldn't bring anything with me."

"Your father's money?"

She looked up at him. She saw his face and said, "Oh!" in her flat voice. As if he had stepped on her toe.

"I see," she said.

He got mad. "Don't always feel so sorry for yourself. So the money isn't here at the moment. But perhaps you'll let me explain."

She shrugged. "What is there to explain?"

"Your father gave me the money because he wanted me to invest it. Perhaps I have invested it. Perhaps I can't liquidate the investment just"—he snapped two fingers—"like this."

"Perhaps you don't have the money any more," she said. Suddenly she began to laugh. It wasn't a hysterical laughter; a quiet, disturbingly sane laughter.

"Maybe," he said, "this is funny to you. It isn't to me."

She took out her handkerchief and blew her nose. "You never had a sense of humor, Louis. At least I can write to father that I had a good laugh for all his money. Most people don't even get that much out of it."

He didn't say anything. He couldn't think of anything to say.

She got up, put on her jacket and straightened out her blouse. "It's all my fault. I should have walked out on you the night you proposed to me and slept with Madame Halik."

"Look, Trudy. If you'll give me some time——"

"Of course. Don't worry about it, Louis. You know that I have no legal proof against you. It was black money. According to all documentary evidence, it is your money. Serves my father right."

"Look," he said. "You can't leave like this. You need something. You ought to have——"

"Don't reach out for your wallet or I'll really scream," she said. "I can manage. I'll take a room at your hotel tonight because it's too late to go elsewhere. I won't have much for breakfast. Just coffee and toast. And a glass of orange juice. I've read about American orange juice."

"Look, Trudy. We don't have to break it off this way. After all, we were friends once——"

She shook her head, as if there wasn't any answer to his words. "You didn't ask me, Louis, but I have bad news about your father."

He looked up at her.

"About father——"

"You never wrote to him either. I saw him. A week before they came for him."

"They——?"

Outside in the hall there was laughter and the clinking of ice cubes in glasses.

"He wasn't angry at you. He said 'I've made my peace with the world, Trudy. I have established direct communication with Him up there. I don't have to go to a house of worship. We've made a compromise, He and I. I'm telling Him everything that's on my mind. In return He permits me to come to Him directly and cut out the middleman's profit.'"

Somebody opened the door and shouted something, and then it was closed again, and the sounds of piano music receded.

"I saw him every day," Trudy was saying. "I hoped he would manage to get into Switzerland before it was too late. Your mother is still there, somewhere near Lugano. She tried to get him in. He wrote to her every day."

Trudy's voice was flat, expressionless. "He was arrested one day after the woman had come into town."

"What woman?"

"The actress. She wore a Nazi uniform."

"Marion? Marion Mara?"

Trudy nodded. "Some people said it was because of her. Because he had once slapped her face." She shrugged. "Others——" Her voice trailed off.

"What did they say?" He stepped toward her, shook her shoulders. "Tell me what the people said!"

"It's rumors, Louis. Nobody knew anything any more for sure. Everything was mixed up."

"What did they say?"

"That they arrested your father—because you had those connections. . . ."

He shook his head dully. He didn't know what she was talking about.

"With the Communists."

It was quiet outside or perhaps he didn't hear anything. So that was it.

"Is he——?"

"Yes." Trudy nodded and turned toward the door. "He died in his cell. Perhaps he killed himself. Or she killed him. I guess we'll never know. . . ."

She was gone but he hadn't heard her leave.

25

THE CONSENSUS of opinion among Claire's friends was that her marriage to Louis had been a colossal mistake.

"It breaks my heart to see her fall for that charmer," said Mrs. Vandervoort, the wife of the rich Dutch cocoa importer. "A smart girl like Claire!"

"I don't think Claire's so smart," said Madame Beaumont. Claire was at the other end of the living room and couldn't possibly hear her.

"She's an acknowledged expert in charm," said Mrs. Vandervoort. She had robust forearms and the complexion of a healthy cow. She was envious of Madame Beaumont's slender, almost boylike figure.

"Chérie, don't be silly," said Madame Beaumont. Prior to her marriage to M. Beaumont, the famous rue de la Paix *couturier*, Madame Beaumont had been a model at her husband's salon. She had changed her lovers almost as often as her new dresses, which made her, too, something of an expert in charm. Both she and Mrs. Vandervoort belonged among Claire's closest friends.

"Poor Claire," said Madame Beaumont. "She certainly made a mess of her life. They don't live together any more."

"Did she tell you?" Mrs. Vandervoort couldn't help admiring Madame Beaumont's matter-of-fact approach to the most baffling biological problems.

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going is good."

"She doesn't exactly look like a happy woman, after four months of marriage. And that great lover Louis, always running after other women."

"Did he—try it with you?"

Madame Beaumont smiled. "Louis knows the limits of his magic spell. I'm not an American girl from Texas. Besides," Madame Beaumont carefully crossed her long, beautiful legs. "What could he get out of me? You at least have your jewels."

Doctor Waldeck, the eminent psychiatrist, lately from Vienna, a bony, sinister man, rubbed his nose. "You're talking of the man Claire loves, I suppose?"

"Doctor Waldeck," said Mrs. Vandervoort, "why *did* she fall for him?"

The psychiatrist kept his eyes closed and thoughtfully rubbed his nostrils. "Evidently a pseudo-sophisticated obsession."

"Oh," said Mrs. Vandervoort, with a blank expression on her homely Dutch face.

"She was attracted to him in a superficial way," Doctor Waldeck went on. "Louis is a curious case. Rather typical, if I may say so. Take his mania for fancy clothes. Those people overdress to compensate for their basic insecurity."

Madame Beaumont shrugged. She had no use for Doctor Waldeck. "If you ask me, they never had a love affair. That's the trouble with those hectic American marriages. People get married after a few hours' acquaintance. Then they are surprised when things don't work out."

"Possibly a case of sexual maladjustment," Doctor Waldeck agreed.

"Where's Louis tonight?" asked Mrs. Vandervoort. "That's the third time he isn't at Claire's parties."

"I bet you my new platina fox coat where he is," said Madame Beaumont.

Mrs. Vandervoort gasped. "No! She *wouldn't*. . . . She's Claire's oldest friend."

Madame Beaumont sneered. "Oldest is right. Christine must be forty-three, at least. She wants to get everything while the going is good."

They laughed. They didn't like Louis. That had often puzzled Claire. Weren't they all from Europe? Claire's friends came from the cosmopolitan set of international stowaways that were moving between the swimming pools of Beverly Hills and the better night clubs of Manhattan. Claire didn't understand that her European friends resented Louis as an upstart. He was betraying their class. He was giving away the tricks of their trade. He was playing their game, but he was overplaying his hand.

"Louis is discrediting all of us," said M. Beaumont, "I can hear the Americans say, 'What can you expect of *them*? *They* are all crooks.'"

"A complete lack of *esprit de corps*," said Doctor von Zedlitz, the erstwhile Prussian industrialist. "We don't even know where he comes from."

"He was completely broke when he married Claire," said Mrs. Vandervoort. "She was his last straw."

There were two groups of people among Claire's Sunday evening guests, separated by an invisible line running diagonally across the living room. The line was seldom crossed even after midnight, when the jagged economic and national contours became softened by French champagne. One side of the living room were the people from Western Europe (including Switzerland, owing to the stability of its valuta), representing high finance, banking, diamonds. The others—people from Central and Eastern Europe—were more on the intellectual if somewhat impecunious side; musicians, artists, literateurs, lawyers, actors and assorted nobodies.

Somewhere in between was Doctor von Zedlitz, the Prussian industrialist who had made his money in banking, and spent it on arts and the artists. He had once been one of the backers of Max Reinhardt and at the same time a major stockholder of I. G. Farben. He was said to have had great power. He had made operetta divas and had broken vice-presidents. Considering his onetime glory, Doctor von Zedlitz had reached a pretty shabby low, owning merely a couple of apartment houses in Manhattan. He was down to his last million bucks and assured everybody that "as soon as it is over" he was going back to his

private island on Lake Como, where he had a palace and the most famous selection of French impressionists outside the Louvre.

Doctor von Zedlitz was forever complaining about the servant problem in this country. He said he'd had sixty-eight retainers on his three-hundred-acre hunting estate in the Austrian Alps.

"Two foresters, a pastry chef, a Kellermeister," he would say. "Here I have only six and they are ten times as much trouble. They rent my house in Pasadena to overnight tourists and honeymooners. It's very irritating."

"Americans are such a young nation," Mrs. Vandervoort said, without any logical connection.

Mr. Vandervoort's Amsterdam cocoa business had amazingly prospered during the first year of the German occupation. Although this had been a most gratifying situation at the time, Vandervoort now found it a little embarrassing. He had been forced to go down to Washington; the State Department might blacklist him. He was relieved to find an astonishing number of sympathetic souls among the capital's influential people. He did a lot of entertaining and managed to get himself cleared.

Vandervoort had the sympathies of M. Beaumont, whose fashion house in Paris had done well by the wives and mistresses of German generals and Party leaders who came to Paris on a shopping spree. Now that he had come to America and his designing talents had been rediscovered by a number of wealthy Park Avenue settlers, he was worried that the De Gaullists might find out about his onetime friendly relations with his German customers.

Besides the Vandervoorts, the Beaumonts, Doctors Waldeck and von Zedlitz, Claire's circle of friends included two Belgian diamond barons, a pale, virginal English poet, and M. Roget, the champagne-and-wine expert. Prior to Claire's marriage they had been meeting at her apartment every Sunday night for dinner. Claire's dinners would have been perfect if she hadn't insisted on serving cocktails before dinner. Her guests considered cocktails a painful manifestation of a barbaric era. They looked upon America and its strange inhabitants with

smiles and shudders. Claire's friends made it a point to live in America exactly as they had lived in their homelands. They made no attempt whatsoever to understand the country. It was a strange, hostile world where strong, tweedy men, members of fashionable after-shaving clubs, were romancing beautiful, cosmetics-conscious women in all-electric kitchens according to the rules of Emily Post. A mist of happiness seemed to surround bigger and better washing machines, iceboxes and cemeteries, where burials were carefully rehearsed by properly dressed, properly depressed staffs.

Claire's friends were careful not to voice such criticism unless they were among themselves. Then the words *chez nous*, back home, would creep into their conversation and their voices would take on a wistful tone. *Chez nous* everything had been better. *Chez nous* the yolks had been more yellow, the aesthetic movements more aesthetic, the theater more refined, the climate more agreeable, the women more fun, the coffee more aromatic, the salesgirls more polite, the smoked eel more smoked.

For the record the Beaumonts, Vandervoorts, Doctor von Zedlitz, Doctor Waldeck never failed to reaffirm that America was a wonderful country. On suitable occasions, M. Beaumont and Mr. Vandervoort would put small American flags on the hoods of their cars. Von Zedlitz never missed the colorful ceremonies of I-Am-An-American-Day in Central Park.

* * *

Louis hated Claire's friends. "They come only to eat our caviar and drink our champagne," he would say.

Claire didn't say that if anybody's, it was *her* champagne.

"Why didn't you come to the party last night, Louis?"

"I told you I can't stand those people."

They made him self-conscious. No magician likes to perform before a convention of professional magicians. They were all waiting for you to slip up. You couldn't fool them.

Claire said, "Perhaps you prefer to spend your evenings with Christine?"

"Why don't you stop running other people's lives?" Louis said.

She didn't answer. Sometimes they would go on for weeks, hardly talking to each other, and when they did, it would always end in an argument.

Once she had said, "Why don't you invite up some of your friends, Louis?"

He was afraid to admit that there weren't any. He called up Kamin and Jeff Baldwin, and asked them to come with Britta and Carol.

He spent the hours before the party in nervous anticipation. He asked Claire what she was going to wear.

"I don't know. The dark dinner dress, with the pink hem, I guess."

"Can't you wear that gray tailleur?"

"At night? In my own home?"

"It makes you tall and straight. And your snake shoes with those extra-high heels." He wanted her to look tall and long-stemmed. Claire looked best in tailored things.

Kamin was only with Jeff Baldwin. They came up late, after ten o'clock.

"Britta and Carol had to go to a charity affair," Jeff said. "Something very British. The Empire was at stake."

Jeff hadn't changed. The plain, open, unworried face. He laughed a great deal, like that night at the Negresco Hotel. He would throw back his head, his mouth wide open, showing his white teeth. "Get me a drink, Louis, I'm dying."

"Of course." Louis mixed the drinks. He felt terribly disappointed that Britta hadn't come. "I'm not going to introduce you to all those boring people," he said to Jeff. "Let's sit down."

Kamin glanced across the big living room. He heard French and German and Russian and Dutch and Hungarian voices, anything but English; the men wore European-cut suits; in one corner Doctor Waldeck and two colleagues were involved in a scholastic argument, interspersing Latin words with German definitions that were as long and heavy as freight trains.

A fat man at the piano was singing a sentimental Viennese song about the Golden Heart of Vienna.

Kamin perceived a faint feeling of awkwardness. These, he realized, were the people he himself belonged to by origin. They made him peculiarly conscious of what it meant to him to be in America. He had never realized how much he had outgrown them.

"Who are they?" he asked Louis.

"Claire's friends. I don't bother much with them."

Kamin avoided looking at Louis. "I heard about Trudy yesterday."

"Is that so?" said Louis. "What?"

"She died of an overdose of sleeping pills. At Overstreet's."

Louis was momentarily stunned. "At Overstreet's?"

"Don't you even know where she lived?"

"I saw her when she came here. I offered her money but she didn't want any. Trudy and I were all washed up, as they say here. I'm dreadfully sorry, but the poor girl is better off this way."

"You might at least have sent her the money which belongs to her father," Kamin said.

"I couldn't raise it at the moment. What was Trudy doing at the Overstreets'?"

"She lived there. He was wonderful," said Kamin. "When I told him about her, he said she could live with them as long as she wanted to, until she got straightened out. They liked her very much. So did the Sherwoods. I guess you haven't seen them lately?"

"I haven't," Louis said. "I don't intend to. Come on, let's go over to the buffet."

There was pressed Beluga caviar, served on imported English crackers, which were quaintly called "tablewater biscuits" and cost sixteen times more than the domestic soda crackers. The *pâté de foi gras* was genuine Strasbourg, the collapse of France notwithstanding. Stuffed anchovies from La Coruña, Spain. Tuna fish from the Azores. Once Colonel Briggs was overheard saying that he preferred the chain store variety of tuna fish.

This was construed as a very funny remark. Claire hugged the colonel and exclaimed, "Corny, you are a *scream!*"

Claire had learned that the international set was highly susceptible to the pleasures of good food and the right wines that go with it. The wines had been selected by M. Philippe Roget, of Lemonnier & Fils. M. Roget had marked the labels with pencil, "chamber temperature," "chilled," "moderately chilled" and similar household hints.

A man next to Kamin, who had his last fifteen hairs arranged like telegraph wires across his bald skull, was saying to another man, "I hope you will all come next Sunday to my garden party."

"What is it this time, Herr Doktor von Zedlitz?"

"Old Salzburg style. Women in dirndls. Men in chamois leather pants, embroidered suspenders, naked knees. We'll have a Schrammel orchestra from Yorkville, Viennese coffee with whipped cream, Sachertorte, cheese strudel."

"Wonderful, Herr Doktor."

On the other side Madame Beaumont explained her newest dress and a former *Direktor* bowed deeply from the waist to his former *Generaldirektor*, like old times. Jeff was being accosted by a thin, nervous man who had just blown into town from Hollywood. The nervous man complained bitterly about Hollywood where a man had to take more humiliation and frustration than he could stand for a lousy \$1750 a week. "When I come home at night," the nervous man was saying, "I'm all done in. Can't do anything but read French philosophy. Always suffering from constipation."

Suddenly Kamin felt that he couldn't stand this any longer. He nudged Jeff.

"Let's go," he said. Jeff shook hands with the unhappy nervous man, swallowed his drink and they left.

"Which one was Louis' wife?" Jeff said as they went out on the street. "The hell with it," he said, without waiting for Kamin's answer. "I guess it's not important."

"No, it isn't," said Kamin. He was thinking of Trudy.

26

MONSIEUR PHILIPPE ROGET sat at his favorite corner table at the Café de la Paix, on Central Park South, sipping his *café noir* which people here kept stubbornly calling demitasse. He was hungry but he couldn't get himself to order.

M. Roget was somewhat touchy about the subject of food in New York. The things the people would eat in this city! The way they would spoil perfectly good foodstuffs! Oh, to be back in Paris, in that little restaurant near the *Halles*, where they served you *tripe à la mode de Caën* in earthen dishes, heated over iron braziers, and the aroma of the tripe would mingle with the sharp smell of sawdust on the floor!

M. Roget sighed and wearily closed his eyes. Since the fall of France, last summer, his preoccupation with Paris had become almost an obsession. Possibly Fernande, her frantic letters and cables for help, had something to do with it. M. Roget had ignored the appeals—after all, it was none of his business that Fernande was in a mess with her sick, tuberculous child, or that Marcel had become a prisoner of war—but somehow he couldn't quite get away from the past, much as he tried to.

M. Roget sighed unhappily. At the table next to him, a dry Middle-Western voice was ordering a hot beef sandwich, "and coffee with it." M. Roget looked around. He saw Louis at the entrance door and snapped two fingers. Just the man I want to see, M. Roget thought. His interest didn't derive from any personal sympathy. Sympathy was an emotion totally alien to M. Roget. His wine business had suffered a serious setback since the beginning of the war in Europe and he had been investigating the possibilities of a project planned strictly within the limits of the law that would get him back on his feet again. This investigation had led to Louis de Linc.

"Sit down, *mon vieux*," M. Roget said cordially. He brushed off an invisible speck of ashes from his lapel with a grand-seigneurial gesture, commented on the weather, the incompetence of American chefs, the short-comings of the English language, and the lamentable quality of American wines. Speaking of American wines, M. Roget lowered his voice to a confidential whisper.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked Louis.

He was vague about his idea. He hadn't told it to anybody yet. It seemed that M. Roget wanted to make the people of America wine-conscious. "Not just the few who have money. There must be millions of people who don't realize the importance of wine with their daily meals. The lower middle classes or the upper lower classes, whatever you prefer to call them. Why can't those people become conditioned to wine like the French or Italians? Because no one ever tried to sell them the idea."

Louis was hardly listening. He was preoccupied. Sometimes lately he found it difficult to keep up the debonair front of the successful man-about-town. He needed money. His marriage with Claire was going on the rocks. Things were so bad that Louis had moved out of Claire's bedroom and was now sleeping in the servant's room.

He didn't care for Claire. He didn't want to touch her. That was the worst part of it. She had become repulsive to him. Besides, Christine Waters was a very possessive woman. With Christine it had to be nothing or everything. Right now, it was everything. He was flattered by her possessiveness. Christine was a wonderful mistress. Louis asked himself whether she would make a possible wife.

Claire? He shrugged, mentally. You could always send her off to Reno—at her own expense. . . .

M. Roget was still talking. "Americans, by and large, will not be able to afford the expensive French wines. But they will buy the inexpensive French table wine. *Vin rosé. Le Pinard*, which the French workers buy *en carafe*, and the Italians in the demijohn."

M. Roget stared at Louis with anxious fixity. "It's all a

matter of salesmanship. A long-range proposition. First," he snapped two fingers, "you get the people here to drink the inexpensive French wine. Gradually," another snap, "they'll get used to it and switch to American wines. In a couple of years the country will have become wine-conscious." M. Roget snapped his fingers twice. "A man with vision can't fail to see the tremendous possibilities. There are millions in this for you and me."

"I?" Louis asked. "Where do *I* come in?" With people like Roget, you had to be always on the defensive.

M. Roget stared dreamily into a nirvana à l'*Americaine*, where the Statler Hotels would install a special wine faucet next to the ice-water faucet in their rooms, and people would step into a drugstore for a bottle of Château Lafitte 1904.

"I don't pride myself on any executive ability. This scheme is too vast, too gigantic for my brains. I need a man with vision. A man who is able to co-ordinate the idea with the necessities of promotion, advertising, sales." M. Roget, carried away by his own imagination, had raised his index finger toward an imaginary, gigantic neon-light sign on Times Square, a monster wine bottle pouring *pinard* into The All-American Drinking Glass.

There was a long pause. Both men were staring absently into space, each busy with his own thoughts, which were curiously similar. Then Louis said, "Such a project is going to cost a hell of a lot of money."

M. Roget was hurt in the very depths of his sensitive soul. Money, money, money, that was all people thought about. Of course, there were minor details such as capitalization, shares, preferred stock, salaries, taxation, profits but they would take care of themselves in due time.

"A man with your connections won't have any trouble in finding the necessary few dollars to start the ball rolling. All we need for the beginning is a quarter of a million dollars. Chicken feed for some of your rich friends, like the Baldwins of Maryland. They have millions and millions. An immense fortune. Building, road construction, investment banking, insurance, lumber."

Louis felt powerless to oppose M. Roget's magnificent optimism. "But the wines," Louis said, with a last vestige of criticism. "How are you going to get the inexpensive French wines now that there is a war on and France is occupied?"

M. Roget coughed nervously. "*Mon cher ami*, leave this little detail to Philippe Roget. There *are* ways and means, Swedish ships and Swiss ships, all sailing under neutral flags, and friendly *commissionnaires* in South America. . . ."

M. Roget was still talking but Louis was way ahead with his imagination. It was a fantastic scheme but America had become big on what had once seemed fantastic schemes. Roget's idea fitted in with Louis' private blueprint of the conquest of America. He could already see sales figures and profit statements. Success, money, independence. You could get rid of Claire and would not have to put up with Christine.

"I might see Jeff Baldwin next week," Louis said cautiously.

"*Bon!*" M. Roget got up. "I'll tackle Jeff's uncle. André is a Louisiana Frenchman. Between the two of us, how can we miss?"

He shook hands with Louis and left. Halfway through the Café, he remembered that he hadn't paid for his *café noir* but he decided to let Louis pay for it. Put it on our future expense account, M. Roget thought. His mind wandered back to Paris. If Fernande had been smart, sticking to her job at the Folies Bergère, she would be in clover right now with the German officers. No matter what you read about the Boches, their officers were gentlemen. M. Roget had met quite a few, in the years before the war. They had been correct, well-mannered and pleasant to deal with, although their preference for Rhine and Moselle wines was slightly perturbing.

In the lobby of the St. Moritz hotel, people were standing around in clusters, practicing the European hobby of aimless conversation. M. Roget put on his gloves and walked straight back to the Plaza, without looking right or left. He had some good cheese in his room—Pont-l'Évêque—which he had bought at the French grocery store in the village at a twenty per cent discount. He would dine on cheese and bread.

27

THE "BALDWIN PLACE," as the members of the family, with a fine touch of self-depreciation, called their estates, was an enormous park with fields, trout streams, forest and lawns, where most members of the clan had their houses, between the soft-curved green hills of Maryland. André Piedmont maintained that the size of the houses was defined by a mysterious seniority system. "The family council assigns the houses the way a hotel manager assigns his best suites," he would say.

It was such opinions that endeared Uncle André to Jeff Baldwin. Most members of the clan were inclined to take Uncle André not too seriously. André Piedmont was a gregarious fellow from New Orleans who liked to intersperse his sentences with French words—the static, lethargic Louisiana French. No one was able to define the scope of his activities. Officially he practiced the law; but he preferred to think of himself as a man with "far-flung international interests." He was forever founding new corporations, buying patents, selling partnerships. It was nothing unusual for Uncle André to ship Swedish iron ore to Canada, by way of the West Indies, and later reimport the same ore to Sweden, as expensive, high-grade Canadian ore. He loved good wine and for years had been one of the best customers of M. Philippe Roget.

It had been a cinch for M. Roget to sell André his grandiose new scheme for making Americans wine-conscious. The difficulty was to sell the idea to Grandfather Baldwin, the head of the family. Grandfather wouldn't touch wine. M. Roget explained to Uncle André that Louis was going to sell the idea to Jeff.

"If he can sell it to Jeff," Uncle André said, "we can clinch

the deal. The family will jump at anything that gets Jeff to work."

Jeff's reluctance to work was one of the family's major problems. For Jeff Baldwin, there was no economic necessity to work. He liked to tell his family that if he lived until sixty, and got mildly drunk once a week, and if he had three children and each of them lived until sixty and got drunk twice a week, there would still be enough for the children of Jeff's children to get into an occasional binge.

Jeff was grandfather's favorite grandchild. Every once in a while grandfather would send Jeff a check. The checks started at \$2000 (the routine Christmas and birthday checks) and ran up all the way to \$25,000 (the post-graduation check which financed Jeff's trip to Europe). Jeff never saw any of the money. His mother, mindful of his generosity, took the checks and deposited them at her bank to Jeff's account.

When Jeff returned from Europe, he discovered, accidentally, that his mother had put his money throughout all those years into a checking account instead of a savings account. His mother had always been vague about the technicalities of money. There now was \$456,000 accumulated.

Jeff closed his checking account and took the money over to grandfather's private bank. Grandfather agreed to take Jeff's money and pay him four per cent interest, which wasn't bad since it had been grandfather's money in the first place.

Grandfather was horrified at the proposed wine deal. "It's all right," he said to Uncle André, "to drink, but not to sell."

"It's the kind of job Jeff will like," Uncle André said.

This argument clinched the deal. Nobody bothered to ask for Jeff's consent. He was being taken for granted.

That had always been Jeff's trouble. They took him for granted. The family, his friends, Carol. The bartender at the Park Avenue hotel who made the Daiquiris the way Jeff liked them. The valet who pressed the clothes in which Jeff had slept. The bellhop who helped him up when Jeff had passed out.

* * *

Louis was an immediate hit with the members of the Baldwin family council when Uncle André brought him to Mrs. Baldwin's house, a depressing mock-Elizabethan building. The large, cold living room had rough-finished white walls, a mirror-enclosed fireplace, gloomy curtains and high-backed, early-American chairs. There were a few undistinguished copies of Renoir and Grant Wood on the walls, a small shelf with books, selected by the judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club and a Capehart radio-phonograph. The phonograph had something wrong with the record changer but the radio did work, at top volume.

Louis was dressed in appropriate style for the occasion. He wore a dark, double-breasted suit which Claire had picked out and paid for a few days after their wedding, white shirt, black shoes. He could have passed for one of those nondescript young men between Broad Street and the Harvard Club.

He did not kiss Mrs. Baldwin's hand, when he was being introduced to her, and lightly shook hands with Grandfather Baldwin, avoiding a bow from the waist. He was polite with the four pretty girls with tanned legs whom Uncle André introduced as his nieces. They had perfect teeth, perhaps because of the braces which they had worn on their teeth until they were fifteen. They were fascinated by Louis, who displayed the suave, nonchalant melancholy of an *homme du monde*.

"If André hadn't told me that you were Jeff's mother," he said to Mrs. Baldwin, "I would have thought you were his older sister."

He spoke soberly, which was the way to talk there, and Mrs. Baldwin reddened perceptibly. She had always suspected, of late somewhat desperately, that she looked much younger than her age but nobody at the Baldwin place had ever bothered to tell her.

Somebody said something about cocktails, and Uncle André made an unsuccessful effort to get out of his deep seat in the corner of Mrs. Baldwin's sofa. There was an uncomfortable silence. Everybody wished he were somewhere else, or had at least two drinks.

"Let me mix the cocktails," said Louis to Uncle André. "If you'll permit," he turned toward Mrs. Baldwin.

"Why, of course. I didn't know that you were making them in Europe."

"Not as a rule. But once in a while, when you were at home with friends. . . ."

Grandfather Baldwin seemed to relax. He had been looking at Louis as if he expected the FBI to pick him up at any moment. But maybe this fellow wasn't one of those phonies whom you could meet nowadays at many parties in Washington. Always with some woman, most of whom were too young or too old to go out with men.

Louis looked over the battery of bottles with what he hoped would be taken as an expert attitude. He opened the Noilly Prat and the absinthe. "A few drops of absinthe will make all the difference on earth," he said lightly, with the easy facility of a cocktail virtuoso.

It was a flawless performance. He had to hand it to himself. If they only knew that not long ago he hadn't known the difference between a Martini and a Manhattan! In his home town there had only been one kind of cocktail—a concoction which dishonest bartenders would mix by pouring into a glass whatever remained in various bottles.

He filled their glasses. Mrs. Baldwin sipped her drink and emitted a girlish, high-pitched cry. "Why, it's delicious! You must show me later how you did it."

"Yum!" said Uncle André. "Just right, Louis." He made a circle out of his index finger and thumb. Grandfather was so intrigued that he said he'd have one, though grandfather was known as a highball-man rather than a cocktail-man.

"I see we came just in time," an electrifying voice was saying. Louis looked up and saw Britta. She smiled, "Hello, Louis."

He wished he could be in the room alone with her and could take her into his arms. She was lovely.

"Hello, Britta," he said. He shook hands with Jeff and Carol. "Drinks?"

"Don't mind if I do," said Jeff. "What's that—a Balkan specialty?"

"Jeff!" Mrs. Baldwin said, with a slight note of reproach. "Mr. de Linc's Manhattan is *divine*."

"You don't say!" Jeff said. He took his drink, tasted it and slowly shook his head in amazement. "I'll be goddamned," he said.

"Jeff!" said Mrs. Baldwin.

"Sorry, mother."

"Where's Kamin?"

"He couldn't make it, mother. He's got some work to finish."

Kamin was not going to be here! Louis saw the slight trembling of his own hand as he filled the glasses. He hoped Britta wouldn't notice.

She took her drink and sat down with Carol on the other side of the room. Louis resisted the temptation to sit down next to her. He pulled up a chair and sat with Grandfather Baldwin.

After the second cocktail everybody talked a little faster. Louis finished a slightly risqué story which greatly pleased grandfather, because it evolved around the political corruption in what Louis called "certain" European countries.

"Good thing such stories couldn't happen in Washington, sir," Louis concluded.

The old man combed his white hair with his fingers.

"They certainly couldn't. We don't go for petty politicking. Our lawmakers are concerned with the broader issues."

Louis watched Britta. The reddish glow of the fireplace made her body a graceful silhouette. When Louis had been a boy, there was a silhouette cutter in town, who for a few coins would cut your silhouette, in black paper. It was pasted on a white oval carton and framed. The artist also sold ready-made silhouettes of pretty girls, half-dressed and in the nude. They had improbably slim waistlines, firm breasts and long legs, and were popular for bars and libraries. Louis tried not to glance over at Britta. He was glad when dinner was announced.

He was seated between Mrs. Baldwin and grandfather. Britta and Carol were with Uncle André at the other end of the table. Louis drank faster and more than he usually did. He talked a lot. He happened to know quite a few amusing stories about

famous people. Louis mentioned their names with reverent familiarity. He knew them personally but he was not on a first-name basis with them. He was impressive by implication rather than directness. His picture of Europe was probably as lacking in authority as an old musical comedy but there was no one to correct him.

He gave a grand performance. He amused grandfather, fascinated the young girls, was polite to Carol, complimented Mrs. Baldwin on the exquisite table setting and her hairdo. By the time the gentlemen stayed at the table for brandy and cigars, Louis knew that he had them all dancing in the palm of his hand. Grandfather, the infallible judge of human nature who could spot a faker at a mile's distance; Uncle André, who trusted nobody, went over his monthly bank statement, and carried a police badge, to be covered in case of speeding.

They were all dancing to his tune. All but Britta.



Carol sat by the radio, trying to get some hot swing for Uncle André's nieces. Louis took turns with them and in between they danced with each other. It was pleasant to watch them, and working on the radio gave her an excuse to decline when Louis came for her.

She didn't want to be in his arms. Not that it mattered; she knew now that it would never matter anymore. She had been frightened at the very thought of meeting Louis but there hadn't been the slightest quickening of her pulse when she had shaken hands with him. He was a stranger. Then Jeff had come and put his arm around her and Carol realized, more than ever before, that there was only Jeff who mattered.

She had been watching Louis. His dinner performance was perfect. He seemed to have bewitched so cold a woman as Mrs. Baldwin. He had danced twice with Mrs. Baldwin, who had perfunctorily protested that she was too old and then enjoyed herself thoroughly.

Mrs. Baldwin stopped by Carol's chair. "Don't you dance, Carol?"

Carol pointed at two girls who were throwing their bodies around with disturbing abandon. "I couldn't do those things, mother."

Mrs. Baldwin took a deep breath. "What a charming man," she said, looking at Louis. "Why didn't Jeff tell me about Louis?"

Carol didn't ask why Jeff should tell his mother everything, as he had unquestionably done until he got married. She noticed that Louis had already established himself in Mrs. Baldwin's mind on a first-name basis.

"Mother," said Carol. "Don't you think you ought to talk to Jeff before any decision is made on that wine business?"

"My dear," Mrs. Baldwin said, "in our family"—she emphasized the word "family" as though Carol had been brought up in a house for illegitimate children—"all business decisions are made on a co-operative basis."

"I always thought grandfather and Uncle André were smart men," Carol said.

"I don't think you are exactly in a position to criticize them," said Mrs. Baldwin, sharply.

Carol got up. She should have known better. "No, I'm not," she said and went out. She was standing on the terrace until her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness. She saw a figure half crouched in one of the wicker chairs.

"That you, dear?" said Jeff.

"Jeff!"

He had a glass and a bottle of Scotch on the table. She took the bottle and carried it over to a shelf in the corner. "You've had enough, dear."

"My dear Mrs. Jeff Baldwin," Jeff said. "Meet Mr. Jeff Baldwin, the first vice-president of American-French Wines, Incorporated. Capitalized at \$200,000."

She sat down on the arm of his chair and put her hand gently on his hair.

"Jeff, are you sure this is what you want?"

He smiled. As always she was struck by the tenderness of his smile that reflected his generous nature. She looked down

at him and suddenly, unaccountably, something inside her chest that was so much part of herself that it hurt, was twisting around and falling over and doing a triple somersault. She bent down and kissed his hair. When she touched his lips and his cheeks, she realized that she was crying, swallowing her own tears.

"Carol! Darling!" He was quite sober now. He turned around and took her face into his hands. "Did I make you unhappy?"

She kept crying. She kissed him. "I'm not unhappy, dear. I'm happy."

She sat down on his lap and sniffled. "Let me have your handkerchief." He held it to her nose and she blew vigorously.

"Are you angry at me?" he asked.

"Darling, you are a fool. I'm not angry."

"Then why do you cry?"

"Maybe I'm in love," she said, and cried again.

He held his handkerchief to her eyes and kissed her hair. "There, there, Mrs. Baldwin. What's the matter? Don't you want to be the wife of a vice-president?"

She kissed him on the cheeks. Nobody knew how wonderfully sweet and kind and understanding he was. Nobody but her. It had taken her a few years to know him. She thought of all those wasted years they had missed and began to cry again. She pulled up his head and kissed him on the mouth and brushed his cheeks.

"You didn't shave this afternoon?"

"I shaved this morning. I didn't know——"

"What?"

"You've never been like that, dear."

"Oh, darling! Darling, darling!" She shook her head and he came up with the handkerchief again. She said, "Jeff, I won't stand for it. I'm not going to look on while they dispose of you as though you were just another block of preferred stock. We'll go away and the hell with them."

"Go where?"

"Any place. The place doesn't matter. It's you and I that matter. I've been such a fool, Jeff. Having you all the time and not knowing that I was having you."

"Perhaps," he said, "one has almost to lose something to know that one really had it."

"We'll run out on them. Right away. Tonight."

He kissed her. "That wouldn't be smart."

"Let's not be smart, darling," she begged. "For once, let's be dumb."

"Running out wouldn't help, Carol. The family council would catch up with us."

He took her into his arms and looked into her eyes. "Why do you think I agreed on this silly business deal they've cooked up? Because it will get us out of here."

"But you don't want to sit in an office with——" She didn't say the name but pointed at the living room. Louis' voice was interpolated by the giggling of the girls and grandfather's bel-lowing laughter.

"I'm not going to go to the office. We're going to have fun, Carol."

She kissed him. "Let's disappear. I can't stand this any more."

"Let's."

They tiptoed across the terrace and walked between the rose-bushes, hand in hand, like a couple of kids on their first date. She grasped his arm with both hands. She felt like crying and laughing and mostly like kissing Jeff.

28

THE HIGHWAY was stretching out in front of the car, a smooth band of silvery velvet. Every once in a while the signs of road-side cafés and the lights of a gasoline station would flash by,

and then darkness and intimacy would close in on them again. The big car seemed to be floating with a low humming sound. There was hardly any motion at all.

"The magic carpet," Britta said.

"God bless Uncle André's Cadillac," Louis said.

He slowed down at a road crossing. A sign said, WASHINGTON 29 MILES.

He could see her legs in the dim light of the dashboard. Her hand was on the seat beside him. They were alone in a private world of their own, a twelve-cylinder de luxe world on wheels, insulated against the cosmos outside by glass, rubber and steel. The lack of space inside their world was outbalanced by the intensity of his emotions. He was physically aware of Britta's nearness. His whole consciousness was aware of her. He wished he could caress her fingers.

"How did you like the party?" she said.

"I couldn't stand it any longer," he said. "I had to get away."

She nodded. "Mrs. Baldwin means well, but she does get on your nerves."

The lights became more frequent. They were in the outskirts of Washington.

She said, "We'd better go back. Uncle André will miss his car."

"Don't you want to see Washington at night?"

She seemed to be moving away into her corner. "Look, Louis. I came with you because you said we'd be back in one hour."

"All right," he said, and looked out of the window to make a U-turn.

She regretted having been rude. And she really wanted to see Washington. "Let's go there for the ride, Louis."

He looked back over his shoulder. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

The lights were burning all through the night in the Pentagon, at Gravelly Point, at the Munitions building. The broad, silent avenues seemed to be infected with a lingering restlessness. Army officers with briefcases were hurrying across the intersections.

The entrance of the big hotel was a blinding sea of light.

Men and women in evening clothes came out of the lobby. From inside came the muted sounds of a dance orchestra.

A doorman in a faded blue uniform came to open the door of the car. He looked very tired; he didn't seem to care how tired he looked.

"How about a drink?" Louis asked.

She blinked. The lights, sounds, voices, rustling gowns fermented in her head. "Just one," she said. He nodded to the doorman and they got out of the car.

The lobby was an incongruous mixture of men in uniform, bellboys, businessmen and gay women. Everybody seemed to be talking too loud and too fast. Louis steered Britta into a dim, red-plush room, where people were dancing and sitting at small tables. There was the smell of brandy and expensive cigars. In front of the bandstand a girl with a throaty voice was singing. "I've Got Plenty of Nothin'."

"Let's dance," he said.

She was keeping away from him somewhat stiffly but presently she began to relax and enjoy herself. He was just the right height for her. When the music stopped, they remained standing on the floor with the other couples. He was holding one arm around her shoulder, until the music started again.

"You dance very well," she said when they were back at their table again.

A tired, sullen-looking waiter came. Louis ordered champagne.

"I don't want any," she said. "I'm not a champagne girl."

"I know, but we have to have champagne." He gave the order to the waiter. "I feel like celebrating."

They drank. He looked into his glass. "It's funny——"

"What is funny?"

"I've been in love with you ever since Nice." He was making thumbnail doodles on the white tablecloth. "I remember you at the Carnival in front of the Negresco. You wore that bare-necked blouse of royal blue with a white twill skirt. It had big polka dots."

She started to get up. "I told you, Louis, that there must never——"

"Please, don't run away." He put his fingers on her hand without looking at her. "Let's stay here a little while. On Saturdays they won't close before six A.M. Let's have breakfast someplace on the way home. I'd like to ride with you through the dawn."

She shook her head. "I'm tired. In another half-hour you would have to carry me out, I'm afraid."

"I can get you a room here at the hotel if you want to go to bed. I'd pick you up for breakfast in the morning."

Her head was bent down to the rim of her glass and the bubbles coming out of the champagne tickled her around the nostrils. Well, this was it. For a while he'd almost fooled her. It was the old song again. What an idiot she'd been to go out with him.

She felt desperately lonely for Kamin. She wished he would come in through the door and take her away. Kamin was never here when she needed him most.

She got up. She didn't know where she was going but she had to get away. "I'll be back in a minute," she said. When she walked past the reservations desk, something occurred to her.

"I want to check on a reservation. It's been made for Mr. de Linc."

The clerk stepped behind the large board and went over the names on the cards.

"I don't seem to find the name," he said. "There's nothing under Linc."

"Try under D. De Linc." Perhaps she had been wrong. She had an uneasy twinge of remorse.

"Oh, yes." The clerk was pulling out two small blue cards. "De Linc. Number 871 and——"

"What time was the reservation made?" How stupid she had been.

"It was made earlier in the evening," the clerk said. She detected an inquisitive glance in his eyes.

"Thank you," she said and turned away. There was a telephone booth. It seemed an eternity until she heard the phone ringing faintly in Jeff's house.

Carol sounded worried. "Where are you? It's past midnight."

"I'm in Washington. I'm having a drink with Louis."

There was a slight pause. Britta knew exactly what was going through Carol's mind and it made her furious.

"I'm all right," she said. "I'm perfectly all right. I'm standing in a telephone booth here in the lobby. I know it's late but would you mind coming here with Jeff and Kamin and picking me up?"

Carol said hastily they would be over as soon as they could make it and if there was any trouble, Britta should call the police. Britta laughed. Carol was a darling but she wasn't very bright.

"Be sure not to mention that I called you, Carol, when you come in here."

She hung up. She sat there for a while, although she hated telephone booths, the closed-in feeling they gave, the mixture of smells, the unsaid words that seemed to be hanging in the air. She got up and went into the lobby.

Jeff and Carol gave a fine performance of looking surprised, as if they had happened to drop in and saw her there with Louis, but Kamin was a flop. Kamin's face was always an open book of his feelings.

"Come on, let's dance," Britta said to Kamin. She took him by the hand. "Good Lord, don't look so mad!" she said, as he put his arm around her. "I was afraid you'd punch Louis in the nose."

"That wouldn't help," he said. "But you had no business coming out here with him."

She kissed him. "Let's go home, darling. Louis will stay. He wants to have breakfast here."

* * *

The room clerk said, "Mr. de Linc? 871 and 343."

Louis handed back one of the two keys. "I need only one room."

"Very well, sir. A lady was asking for the reservation a while ago."

"I know," Louis said. "It doesn't matter any more."

The elevator operator was a thin-faced man. "Floor, please?" Louis looked at the number on his key. "Three."

Floor Three. The room which he had taken for Britta had been on Floor Eight. That was the way Louis had intended it. Five floors between them. Not even a good-night kiss.

The elevator came to an abrupt stop.

"Sorry," the man said. "I missed the floor."

"You didn't," Louis said.

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

"I missed the floor."

The elevator operator didn't answer. It was Saturday A.M. At that time they always started talking in riddles.

* * *

The Baldwin family council was pleasantly surprised. Jeff seemed to agree on practically everything they had decided. He was going to New York with Carol to supervise the organizational details of the new wine business. Grandfather gave Jeff a five-thousand dollar check. "New York's one hell of an expensive town," he said.

Jeff and Carol didn't go to the hotel which had been the Baldwin headquarters for a generation. They rented an apartment overlooking the East River. There was a small garden by the river where Jeff would sit and paint.

Jeff and Carol were never at home when a member of the family announced his visit. They seemed to be extremely busy. They didn't come to the Baldwin Place for the week-end. Jeff stopped using his mother's charge accounts. Once she asked him about it but Jeff said, never mind, he preferred to pay cash for Carol and himself.

American-French Wines, Inc., were having luxurious offices installed on the top floor of a Madison Avenue building, complete with leather furniture, Norwegian birch paneling, and deep rugs. Grandfather Baldwin objected to the unnecessary expenses but Louis explained that the interior decorations were part of a well-considered promotion campaign.

It was noted around the premises that Jeff Baldwin, first

vice-president, hardly ever appeared. When people asked Louis, the second vice-president, about Jeff, he would shrug. "He's out making important contacts." It almost seemed as if the first vice-president wasn't needed around the premises.

Meanwhile the third vice-president, M. Philippe Roget, was busily conferring with interior decorators, contractors, promoters, deliverers, money takers. He did everything except what he was really supposed to do. M. Roget couldn't get any inexpensive French wines. There was some trouble with the Swiss or Swedish ships, or possibly with the *commissionnaires* in South America who had let him down. M. Roget swore terribly, in French and English, when he mentioned the *commissionnaires* to Uncle André.

American-French Wines, Inc., opened for business on December 1, 1941. Exactly six days later all international business was shot to pieces. This was hardly the moment to make Americans wine-conscious.

Perhaps the war was the reason for American-French Wines, Inc., folding up by the end of the month; although it was rumored in the city that M. Roget, the third vice-president, had vanished with part of the company funds. Some people said he had embezzled as much as \$100,000. Actually Roget had taken only \$61,000 in cash and for the rest had charged undelivered office furniture, non-existent wine stocks and an imaginary promotion campaign.

Jeff went to his draft board and enlisted as a private in the United States Army, turning down a commission in the Navy which grandfather had wangled for him. Louis was out of a job again.

* * *

"Merely a formality, Mr. de Linc," said Mr. Folsey, the lawyer. "You'll have to sign those papers."

"What's that for?" Louis asked.

"In case Mr. Baldwin decides some day to prosecute Philippe Roget. We thought we'd better have this affidavit of yours, by way of evidence. Merely a formality."

"Have they found Roget yet?"

Mr. Folsey took down his glasses. "No. I am afraid that he's slipped across the border. Canada, perhaps. Quebec. Roget speaks French and English."

"And he's got sixty thousand dollars cash."

"Unfortunately," the lawyer said. "Naturally, the Baldwin family doesn't want to get this into the papers."

"I can imagine," Louis said.

"Old Mr. Baldwin said it made him feel a little better to know that you too were taken in by Roget's line," Mr. Folsey said. He got up. "I'm going down for lunch. Will you join me?"

"Thanks," Louis said. "I'm going to a wedding."

Kamin had called last night. He and Britta would be married at the Municipal building this morning. "We made a sudden decision. I may have to go into the Army soon. . . . Will you come to Jeff's place after the wedding? Just the family and a few friends."

"Yes, I'll be there," Louis had said. When he hung up, he realized he hadn't even wished them luck.

The cab was running into a series of red lights and the driver cursed under his breath but Louis didn't mind. If only the red lights would never stop! All night long he had rehearsed the scene, every detail of it, while he had been lying in the darkness with wide open eyes. The words, the gestures, the smiles.

"Come on, Louis, don't you want to kiss the bride?"

There was a traffic jam on Fifty-Seventh Street, while the cab was stalled near a newsstand. Louis bought a paper and glanced over the headlines. He had acquired the American habit of reading only the headlines. He opened the inside of the paper with the columns. He always read Alexis Souvarov's column first, all the way through, and always with a slight feeling of apprehension. Alexis rarely missed an opportunity to hit at him, but in this country the only important thing was to have your name mentioned in the column, no matter in what connection. The time to worry was when they no longer printed your name.

None of us who had the privilege of knowing her will forget Mrs. H. S. Brown who died in her sleep last night, at her Plaza apartment. . . . I am saying good-bye to the grandest, smartest little old lady I've known in my day. . . . Mrs. Brown helped thousands of people and would never admit it. . . . Shortly before her death, she made her granddaughter, Princess Nikki, her sole heir. . . . Which puts Nikki into one class with the Doris Dukes and Gloria Vanderbilts. . . . Incidentally, Nikki isn't going to play the glamorous part of the richest young girls. . . . She will go overseas soon and enlist with the Belgian forces. . . .

The cab was jerking forward. Louis carelessly folded the paper and threw it on the floor. "Richest young girl . . . in one class with Doris Duke and Gloria Vanderbilt. . . ."

Life could be as cruel as a beautiful woman. Nikki, the little ugly mouseface who had been hopelessly, terribly in love with Louis. Heir to the millions of Mrs. Brown, Brown's Balmy Breakfast Bacon, You Spy It And Fry It, Tested by the Institute of Happy Homemaking. Millions of dollars, and a princess to boot—what was wrong with that? With all those millions, a man could stand a little mouseface, especially after one made sure she wouldn't always be around.

The driver stopped two houses too far and started to back up but Louis said, all right, he would walk back. The rain had ceased. Louis gave the driver a bill when he saw a black limousine drive up behind the taxi in front of Jeff's place.

Louis pressed himself into a corner of the cab. Looking through the glass in the rear, he saw Britta get out of the big car. Kamin and Jeff followed. They talked to the driver while Britta waited in front of the entrance. Louis could see her clearly through the rear window. The slender body silhouetted against the light-gray wall of the house. The lovely profile, the straight shoulders, the pretty legs.

His head and neck hurt from his unnatural, strained position. He was staring so hard that his eyes became filled with tears. For a moment he had the crazy impulse to jump out of the taxi, grab her and drive away with her. Then he saw Ka-

min turn around and come toward her. Kamin was talking to her. She laughed and pressed his arm with both hands. Then she stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Suddenly the rain started again. Threads of water ran down the glass, obscuring Louis' view. He rubbed the glass furiously with his hands, and tried to roll down the window at the side, but it was stuck. He heard a voice. The driver was talking to him.

"Here's your change, Mister." The man held his hand across his shoulder, without turning around. "I haven't got all day to wait."

Louis opened the door and looked out. The limousine was still there but Britta and the men were gone. Louis slumped back into the car and closed the door. His heart was pounding. He was sure he couldn't face her. He just couldn't.

"Let's go back," he said to the driver. "Come on, let's go!"

"Christ!" the man said, sullenly. "Where to, Mister?"

"The place where you picked me up." The taxicab swung around, making a swerving U-turn.

"Wait, driver!" Louis said. The swerving movement of the cab jolted him back into reality. There was only one thing to do now. "Let's go back to Park Avenue. Park and Seventy-Seventh."

It was one o'clock. Christine Waters would be at home.

29

CHRISTINE WATERS had insisted on an austere wartime wedding ceremony with a slight military note. It was the fashionable thing to do. She regretted that Louis had not served in any European army—the uniform of a member of the United Nations Forces would have added color to the ceremony. After some deliberation, she asked Brigadier General Cornwall

("Corny") Briggs to be her best man. The general looked martial and distinctly in key with those trying times in the photographs that appeared in the suburban newspapers and later in *Town & Country*. The guests agreed that General Briggs looked considerably better than the bridegroom.

Some people said it was strange that she hadn't married General Briggs. Christine liked to say that she couldn't take Corny Briggs away from Uncle Sam. This didn't make much sense because General Briggs' part in this war was to travel around and make Army-Navy-E awards during presentation ceremonies at hundreds of factories, an assignment for which he was admirably fitted. He could make a horribly phrased speech sound convincing, even after the forty-ninth time.

Sometimes she asked herself why she was marrying Louis, and not Briggs. Perhaps Louis had been there one day at the right moment, during one of her lonely spells, and Briggs hadn't. Of late, Christine would have a panicky feeling when she looked at herself in the mirror. A lot of sleep and her beauty operator would take care of the wrinkles around her eyes, but the skin of her neck was becoming a give-away. Two more years, four or five at the most, perhaps a fling at plastic surgery, but what then? There were other things which no surgeon could fix. How was she going to hold a man then? Any man? So many had left soon after Pearl Harbor. They might not be back for a long time, if ever. Any man was better than no man at all, provided he fulfilled Christine's minimum requirements.

It had been a matter of cold-blooded barter. Christine was trading her financial assets for Louis' stronger and younger years. She was taking a chance, but so was Louis, considering the instability of all financial investments. Christine didn't go for soft words, soft music, soft lights which were merely a prelude to the only thing that counted, but Louis could be fun. Furthermore, the other women were crazy about him. They thought he was a terrific lover. They all wanted to have affairs with him.

It was too bad about Claire but Claire would get over it. Judging from her new pictures in the magazine advertisements,

she had got over it already. Claire conducted new Special War-time Courses in her Charm School, How to Stay Young While He's Away, and You Too Can Be a Wartime Bride. On second thought, Christine had not invited her to the wedding.

Only Christine's very best friends, hardly four hundred and fifty people, were present. The bar was terrific. Everybody, with the sole exception of General Briggs, was having a wonderful time. The General was lying in a chair on the lawn overlooking Christine's beautiful Long Island estate. He seemed to be drunk and unhappy. He did not look every inch like two grades above his present rank, which would have made him a lieutenant general. He made Christine think of a prematurely aged West Point cadet in search of his mother.

"Why did you do this to me?" he was saying, time and again. "We were engaged. I told mama about it. What am I going to tell her now?"

Christine gently took the glass out of his hand. "Don't tell her anything, Corny," she said.

He stared at her. "Then there's still hope for me?"

"You should know, Corny, that a General must never give up," Christine said. "Go and get yourself a cup of black coffee."

* * *

Christine was outraged when the local board intended to draft her husband for the United States Army.

"As a private!" Christine said. "There *must* be a way out!"

The board stubbornly refused to classify Louis de Linc as III-B, "man with dependents engaged in an activity essential to the support of the war effort," although Christine's attorneys argued that her husband was handling his wife's financial holdings in three war-production industries. The local board also refused to put Louis into III-C, "farm worker with dependents."

"It's persecution," Christine would say to her friends. "Unmitigated, undemocratic persecution. We have almost a hundred chickens. My rose garden has been turned into a lettuce and broccoli field and Louis takes care of it. What else do you have to do to be classified in III-C?"

At the end of the lettuce-and-broccoli season Christine took a house in Washington and started to entertain on a high plane. General Briggs was frequently seen at her parties. So were a couple of colonels from the adjutant general's office who had a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for food and drink, especially drink.

There were a few more skirmishes between Louis and his local board but two weeks before he was up for reclassification, he was appointed captain, Army United States, after the matter of his American citizenship had been straightened out. In due course Louis de Linc, captain, AUS, serial number O-699 1162, was assigned to the staff of Brigadier General Cornwall Briggs at the Pentagon Building, heading a special bureau with a long and involved name. Nobody had ever heard of it, but Louis clearly indicated, by sinister gestures and things left unsaid or half said, that the outfit was top secret. He shared Washington's current love for secrets. Everybody was playing the old childhood game of Secrets which one would share only with one's best friends. If you didn't know the Secrets, nothing would help you—money, a good school or a house in Newport. There were only two classes of people: those who knew the Secrets, and perhaps even the Top Secrets, and the others who didn't.

In the spring of 1943, Captain de Linc accompanied Major General Briggs on a flying trip to North Africa and England. He had become a colorful figure. Louis owned thirteen different uniforms, among them a Palm Beach outfit, a white mess jacket, and an Eisenhower jacket which he had worn around the slit trenches of Washington. His dress pinks were always a shade lighter than the usual pinks, and his Class A uniform was a shade darker.

He returned from England after sixteen days, wearing the American and Europe-Africa-Middle-East Theater campaign ribbons, a Distinguished Unit badge, the Air Medal, the American Defense Service ribbon, three ribbons awarded to him by the governments-in-exile of Poland, Belgium and Norway, and the Purple Heart. Louis hoped to take an overnight trip to Hawaii, so he could also wear the Pacific Theater ribbon. He col-

lected ribbons with the same adolescent exuberance with which he had once collected ties and girls.

It was not quite clear how Louis had acquired the Purple Heart. One version was that he had bumped his forehead on the windshield when his jeep had hit a latrine on the Grafton-Underwood airfield near Kettering, Northamptonshire. Others said his left hand got caught in the door of a taxicab in front of the Savoy Hotel in London. He hadn't felt the pain right away, owing to a few drinks, and an elderly British woman had said, "He doesn't even flinch. The cool courage of those Americans!"

At Christine's next party, Louis wore a British battle dress and parachutist's boots. He looked intriguingly mysterious, a walking top secret. He had seen "Ike" and "Monty" and he knew everything, even the date of the invasion.

But he never got there. He was sitting out the war behind the Pentagon desks and the cocktail bars of Washington, D.C. When he finally flew to Europe, in the cold, drizzling fall of 1945, the war was over. The big game had been played without Louis. There was nothing left on the field but an enormous heap of litter, refuse and strewn paper. The people of Europe, victors and vanquished alike, tired, blinded and deafened, were beginning to sweep the refuse out.

* * *

Major General Briggs had insisted on Major de Linc's flying with him to Europe in his personal C-51. Washington had become thin ice for generals; at the Pentagon more silver stars were falling than in a hot summer night over the Mohave Desert. The demand for generals had suddenly, bewilderingly dried up. General Briggs was lucky in getting himself a job with the Army of Occupation.

"It will be fun," he said to Louis. "We're going to have ourselves one hell of a time."

Louis didn't answer. Another three months and his promotion to lieutenant colonel was going to come through. This was a military age; he loved to have a military title. Louis had been fascinated by gentlemen from England, Argentine and Ru-

mania who put their military rank before their names. He was going to be "Colonel de Linc." He would go around the world—with his car, chauffeur, butler and secretary, all carefully briefed to address him "Colonel." It was an enticing prospect.

"Yes, sir," General Briggs repeated. "We'll have one hell of a time."

That stupid bastard, Louis thought. He needs me over there. He would never find his way around the back streets of Europe. I'll be aide-de-camp—travel guide—interpreter. Also chambermaid, apple polisher and woman procurer, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

"Christine won't like my going away," Louis said. It was a figure of speech. Christine wouldn't care and he knew it.

"I have talked to Christine," Briggs said. "I have arranged with the Red Cross to have her come over on some kind of job."

Louis looked down at the general—a good-looking, pompous man. "Is that promotion to colonel on the level?" he asked. He added, as an afterthought, "sir."

"As soon as we get there. And I'll try my best and throw in the Legion of Merit, for good measure."

Louis packed his stuff and took along one of the velvet-lined cases in which Christine kept her jewels, for his extra supply of decorations, ribbons, lapel bric-à-brac, buttons. He bought himself three Legion of Merit ribbons. You couldn't always buy them overseas and Louis wanted to have the ribbons when the decoration came through.



It was a grim, cold, hungry winter for the people of Europe, but the gayest, warmest, drunkest winter for the aide of an American general. You didn't have to see the grimness outside your car, your requisitioned palace, your night clubs, your deluxe hotels; you didn't have to see it in the eyes of the people. Grimness, Major de Linc would say to his junior officers, was merely a state of mind. The victors and the vanquished alike were grim, cold, hungry, the right ones and the wrong ones, and frequently the wrong ones were less hungry than the right ones.

There were general officers' messes, officers' messes, casual messes, enlisted men's messes. There were PX rations, and candy bars and cigarettes. It was a sweet winter, boy, oh boy, you never had it so good back home. Back home you couldn't live like that if you were a millionaire's son. In America even millionaires' sons have to pay for what they buy. Here you didn't have to pay. Everything was free. Europe wanted you to live on the house. The houses, the vintage wines, the beautiful women, the crystal and silver and china and damask. A little favor maybe, now and then, a word here for a man with a doubtful past, a little note there for an ex-collaborationist. Little I.O.U.'s which some day might come up for reimbursement. But until then, who cared?

Brother, it was a sweet life. Champagne dinners, parties, wild night, women. The French marquise in her medieval castle in Normandy, with gasoline, nylons, chocolate and a Packard provided by the American taxpayers. Signora Salvamini, the statuesque Roman beauty who had been the Duce's favorite portrait painter and asked Louis for a letter from General Briggs, so she could have her own showing in Paris. Fräulein Arlene Hoffman from Vienna, the daughter of a famous brain surgeon who made love to him, grinding her teeth and in-between asked him to reinstate her father as university professor. Little women and little favors, what was wrong about that?

For a few weeks Louis was busy with a cool, smart woman post-war correspondent for the Hearst publications, a former Hollywood columnist who had come to Europe to get "the feel of things." She had a tendency to offend people when she was drunk, but she would get Louis' photograph into her publications.

One night, at the Sphinx cabaret, Louis saw a full colonel. The back of his head seemed familiar. He was slouched into his chair, half sitting and half lying, lazily watching the show which consisted of a group of frantically undressed young women. Louis stood up and walked toward the man. He had grown a mustache but his eyes had still the sentimental softness on top of millions of layers of hard granite.

"Jim Sherwood. Colonel Sherwood!"

"Louis, I'll be damned!"

Jim ordered another bottle of champagne. He was on his way home.

"Katherine wanted to come over but I talked her out of it. I want to go back and forget this goddamn war fast. H. W. is getting sick. I've got to take charge of the office again."

"Overstreet? What's the matter with him?"

"Just tired, I guess. The old man has done a remarkable job. He took over while I was gone. We have grossed last year more than any other fund-raising firm. That old optimist really did spiral them into a frenzy of giving."

"Did you go back to Prague and that Czech girl?"

Jim's eyes grew soft and wet. "Yep. And I wish I hadn't gone there."

He rubbed his chin. "No use going back, Louis. Vlasta was still there. She's become heavy. The food, I guess. You can't stay slim on potatoes and turnips. Well, that's *one* thing that makes me happy to go back to Katherine."

Katherine, Louis thought. He couldn't remember the face. What had she been like?

"I saw your friend a few months ago. That writer."

"Kamin?"

"Yep. Said he had plenty of T.S. in Africa, the Persian Gulf and Italy before they assigned him to the staff of *Stars and Stripes* in Rome."

"A pencil pusher! What kind of war is that?" Louis sneered.

"They're doing a swell job, Louis."

"Sure."

"You know his wife?" Jim Sherwood said. "Brother, she looks like somebody I wouldn't mind coming home to."

"Yes," Louis said. He was staring into space. "I know her. I wanted to marry her."

Jim Sherwood gulped down his champagne. He really didn't like champagne, he liked Bourbon much better but when you kept your nose closed and drank it fast you didn't feel the bubbles on your throat.

"Oh, well," he said. "We all want to marry the other guy's wife. Which reminds me: how is the Missis?"

"Christine will be here in a few weeks."

"Good for you, Louis. I hear you are working for a two-star general."

"That's one way of putting it." Louis' eyes followed the bubble dancer on the floor who was revealing the secrets of her anatomy. The Parisian version of Salome's dance of the seven veils. From a distance, she looked like Britta and the dim light made the illusion perfect. "Sometimes the general's working for me."

Jim laughed. "I can imagine."

"I haven't had much trouble with him. And he's out of town much of the time. Which leaves me on my own." He got up. "Give my regards to Broadway, Jim."

"I guess you won't come back?"

"I like the Rue de la Paix better," Louis admitted.

"I guess so."

"Don't get me wrong, Jim. America is a wonderful country."

Jim Sherwood looked up at Louis without changing his comfortable reclining position. He started to laugh.

"You don't have to hand out official statements for my benefit, Louis. You never cared about America."

"I am," Louis said with great dignity, "an American."

Sherwood wiped his lips with the palm of his hand. "Don't give me that crap, Louis. It did work once but it won't any more. I must have met too many Louises since I saw you the last time." His voice became almost inaudible. "I've pulled a few dirty tricks in my life, Louis, but I've never gone after a fellow and at the same time after a fellow's wife."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Louis.

Jim Sherwood filled his glass. "I didn't expect you to."

* * *

Christine was very smart in her grayish-blue Red Cross outfit that had been made for her especially by Madame Schiaparelli. A near-sighted A.T.C. corporal started to whistle as she

got out of the plane on Orly Field in Paris, until he saw that this hot cookie was being awaited by a two-star general.

"You look marvelous, dear," said General Briggs. "They must have ripped you off the cover of *Vogue*."

"You're cute, Corny," said Christine and kissed him on the lips. She looked around. "Where's Louis?"

"He had to go to Berlin," said the general. "Ought to be back in a few days."

General Briggs' Cadillac limousine was adorned with two American flags and escorted by two MP's on motorcycles with shrieking sirens. As the cavalcade approached the Porte d'Italie, the MP's let go with their sirens and Jake, the general's chauffeur, a former Los Angeles taxi driver, once hampered by the traffic regulations, speed limits and cops of his home town, stepped on it as he would never have dared on Wilshire Boulevard. Terrified French men and women jumped aside. Twice the driver barely avoided running over children. At the intersections, the Paris police stopped all traffic until the general's cavalcade had passed.

Christine was excited. As a child she had always wanted to ride in a car with sirens. "Gosh, Corny," she said. "But what about the French? They won't like it?"

"My dear," the general said, "I am taking a dim view of those people. It's their fault that we have to stick around here."

Christine looked at General Briggs with new interest. Back in Washington, a two-star general was a luncheon date but definitely not a dinner date. Here, against the background of the liberated country, Corny took on the stature of a great conqueror. Everywhere Christine went with the general, the French fell flat on their faces when he addressed them. She had thought that there was a sexless charm about Corny Briggs, but observing him closely, Christine wondered whether her judgment had not been wrong. Perhaps his charm wasn't so sexless, after all. From what she heard, the general was quite a man with the ladies. There were a couple of Belgian actresses and the French mistress of a former German Field Marshal. Christine was surprised. Who would have thought that of Corny?

General Briggs installed Christine in his seventeenth-century palace on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, which he kept calling "Saint German." It had a marble staircase, and a ballroom with gold-painted panels and gilded torchères. The general's bedroom had Venetian mirrors all over the walls and at the ceiling. An ingenious arrangement, he explained to her as he showed her the house. It seemed that Louis XV or XVI had used this house as a hiding place, if she knew what he meant.

"Corny, you are wonderful," she said and kissed him on the mouth.

When Louis was not in town, which happened frequently in the weeks that followed, General Briggs would take Christine to the general officers' mess. One evening he called in his aide-de-camp who had just returned from an errand to London.

"Louis," said the general, "I'm giving a dinner party on Tuesday for Archie Livingston-Livingstone. I am sure you have no objection toward my asking your wife to act as the official hostess?"

"Of course not. Christine should be pleased."

"A place like this needs the feminine touch," said the general, with a slight trace of melancholy. "Christine will impress those bastard Limeys." General Briggs seemed to be lost in some heavy thinking, which always took a lot out of him.

"Your Legion of Merit should come through any day now, Louis."

"Thank you," said Louis. And he added, "sir."

30

THE DINNER PARTY in honor of Major General Archibald Malcolm Livingston-Livingstone, C.B., C.M.G., C.B.E., O.B.E., K.H.P., D.S.O. was an unqualified success. The carnations for

the table had been flown in from Nice and Bordighera on General Briggs' personal C-51. Jérôme, the *maître d'hôtel*, had produced eighteenth-century *bleu céleste* Sèvres plates. The dinner had been prepared by a celebrated chef from the Tour d'Argent and the menu was composed in honor of the star personalities and read:

Le Potage Parmentier

La Belle Truite de Ruisseau aux Raisins Grillée Rochefort

La Côte d'Agneau Anglaise Double Livingston-Livingstone

Le Chapon de Grand Luxe aux Champignons General Briggs

Parfait aux Liqueurs Eisenhower

Baked Alaska Christine

Christine sat at the head of the table, having at her right the English guest of honor. On her left sat General Rochefort of the French Army. Also present were an American senator, member of the Senate Military Committee, a magazine editor from New York; M. de Lilas, a French businessman who had been on friendly terms, successively, with M. Stavisky, M. Flaudin, M. Daladier, M. Bonnet, M. Pierre Cathala and M. Bidault; the woman post-war correspondent from Hearst; a score of military people.

Louis was sitting at the lower end of the table, next to the correspondent who was going back to America to write a book on "A Woman's War." He didn't pay any attention to her. He couldn't get his eyes off Christine.

She wore a stunning low-cut evening gown of blue-black faille taffeta, stiff with sprays of jet embroidered flowers, one of Molyneux' first great post-war efforts. The dress had the shade of her blue-black hair. Louis' mind went back to his first meeting with Christine, in Claire's apartment. The sphinxlike expression on Christine's *femme fatale* face had seemed to conceal repressed sensuality. Looking at her now across the table, Louis was struck again by her intriguing beauty although he had learned that the sphinxlike expression was but a mask for Christine's boredom. And candlelight always made her look

fifteen years younger. Louis suddenly discovered that his wife had become very desirable to him. He regretted that he wasn't sitting next to her.

Christine seemed changed ever since she had come to Paris. For the past two years in Washington, they had hardly lived together. At different occasions the question of a divorce had come up but Christine said that there was a war on and you didn't divorce a man in uniform even if he was fighting his battles behind batteries of Scotch and Bourbon in the nation's capital.

Louis had agreed. Christine was convenient—like a new car, a new suit or a new radio-phonograph. She was custom-built, looked well at parties, was an excellent hostess, furthered the career of her husband and withdrew discreetly whenever Louis was busy with one of her girl friends. There had been a few unpleasant scenes in the very beginning but later Christine seemed to have become resigned to her rôle.

All this was changed now. Christine seemed to be living her own life. She was an extremely busy woman. Dining at the Ritz, afternoon teas at hotels and fashion houses, parties for visiting dignitaries and experts-at-large, having her photograph taken while she was handing out coffee and doughnuts in a Red Cross clubmobile to grimly smiling GI's.

She would spend her week-ends in the country but Louis was never invited to join her. Christine explained that she was going to see friends of her second husband's, Lord Perckel-Lyttleton.

"It wouldn't be quite right for me to take you there."

"It seems all right for you to take Briggs."

"Please, dear," she would say, with slight irony. "Corny is an American general, *after all!*" She smiled as if there was nothing else to be said, and there *was* nothing to be said.

A few weeks ago Louis had said, "Suppose we spend an evening at the apartment? We can have dinner up there, just the two of us?"

"Why, Louis?" She shook her head as if she could hardly believe her eyes. "You want me to cook for you and wash the dishes?"

He had tried to laugh it off. "I'm going to wash the dishes myself." He had meant it too. He was getting tired of running around in circles, playing the glorified lackey for General Briggs. Prior to Christine's arrival in Paris, General Briggs had been flying all over Europe on "inspection trips" which would always wind up in the castle of a fellow general and friend from the Point. Meanwhile Louis would stay in Paris and have the run of the town.

Now it was the other way around. Briggs would stay in Paris, taking Christine to formal receptions, and Louis was ordered out of town on errands which could be easily performed by junior officers.

Once he had complained to Christine about it. She smiled, "You are still in the Army, aren't you?"

"I'd rather spend my evenings with you than taking out French dignitaries for Briggs."

"Darling," she said with mock surprise. "I'm flattered."

"Christine, what's come between us?"

"Has there ever *been* anything between us?"

"You talk to me as if I were a stranger."

"Stop being silly, Louis. You've had your fun. Signora Salvamini. Fräulein Arlene Hoffman. And that woman correspondent."

"They don't mean anything to me. You know that."

"I don't know and frankly, I don't give a damn."

"Can't we once spend an evening together, you and I?"

She said, with bitterness, "There was a time when I wanted to spend every evening with you."

She had walked away from him, straight and unbending.

A few days ago he had received an airmail letter from the States. It had no sender's address and contained a newspaper clipping. Louis recognized Alexis Souvarov's column, the interchange of Roman and Italic typeface, the smart-alecky titles, the sentences trailing off into unfinished nothingness, separated from one another by the three "pistol shots." The world had gone through an Armageddon and was trying to blow itself up but Alexis was still doggedly, inaccurately registering the foibles of "society." Louis read:

If Madame Rumor's Reports are not incorrect, American society in postwar Paris is headed for fireworks that will make the *Fourth of July* look like a burned-out 25-watt bulb . . . The protagonists in my latest international exclusive from *Gay Paree* are a tall, dark and mustached American general, and the still-beautiful wife of an *American Major* of European ancestry. . . .

* * *

By three o'clock all guests had left under their own power except Major General Archibald Malcolm Livingston-Livingstone, who had passed out under the table and was alternately laughing and crying into the Aubusson rug.

General Briggs was stroking the ends of his mustache, a gesture he'd copied from a British field marshal whose mannerisms were better known among his contemporaries than his victories would probably be to historians.

"I'm afraid you'll have to take him home," General Briggs said to Louis. "I don't want him to wind up in a manhole."

"Where does he stay?"

"Out in Versailles. Take my Cadillac. See that he gets into bed all right. We don't want any trouble with those Limeys."

Christine looked on from the top of the stairway while two French waiters and Jake, General Briggs' driver, dragged General Livingston-Livingstone down the stairs. She yawned and said, "Good night, boys," to Louis and General Briggs, and slowly walked up the stairway to the fourth floor, like a Ziegfeld star. Louis was hurt. She had no right to call Briggs and him "boys." After all, he was her husband.

"Be sure to get him into bed all right," General Briggs called after Louis.

It was a damp, cold night. Louis shivered in his sports coat, a martial, worn garment with leather patches at the elbows which gave the impression that its owner had been through all the battles from El Alamein to the Ruhr pocket. The prospect of moving two-hundred pounds of drunken British brass out to Versailles, three-quarters of an hour, and coming back,

another three quarters of an hour, was unpleasant. The Englishman was sliding down from his seat and was now gently snoring on the floor of the car.

"Let's go by way of the Bois," Louis said to the driver.

In the hour before dawn, the smell of humid earth and withered leaves was strong in the Bois de Boulogne. Louis rolled up the window and deeply inhaled the air. The smell always brought back a childhood association. Louis had been playing with other children in the park, building big heaps of withered leaves, when they pointed into the dark alley under the old oak trees, saying, "Isn't that your father?" It had been his father, with a woman whom Louis had never seen before. "Your mother?" they had asked him, and seeing his fallen face, they had started to laugh and threw the leaves at him singing, "That's his father but not his mother, that's his father but not his mother," until he had run away, covered with leaves and shame. Louis pulled up the window of the car and put up his coat collar. He was shivering.

At the Porte de Saint-Cloud, Louis saw a military police three-quarter-ton truck. He told Jake to stop his car.

"Can you take me back into town?" Louis asked the MP who sat behind the wheel. "I've got to get there. An emergency."

The man looked at him dubiously from under his white-painted helmet. Louis showed him his special pass.

The man came to life and saluted. "Certainly, sir," he said. He stared at the British general on the floor of the Cadillac.

Louis got out and gave Jake a careful briefing. Jake was a smart guy. It wasn't the first time that he had helped Louis with a delicate errand. Getting British generals into bed, or French women out of it. Jake was a sharp kid. Louis was always bothered by his inability to decipher any human emotion in Jake's face, but perhaps there was none besides greed.

"Sure," Jake said. He started to shift into low gear, let the clutch out and said, very softly so that the MP couldn't hear, "By the way, Maj, I'd like to go to Reims this week-end. Can I borrow your staff car?"

Louis knew that Jake was ordering hundreds of cartons of

cigarettes through a pal in the Quartermaster Corps, which he exchanged for champagne and antiques. The champagne and antiques were sent to the States by way of another friend in the Quartermasters. This procedure eliminated shipping expense, circumvented the strict exchange regulations and probably made everybody happy: the French dealers, the pals in the Quartermasters, and the suckers who bought the champagne in the States. It was a sweet life for the driver of an American general, if he was smart and kept on friendly terms with the general's aide-de-camp.

"All right," Louis said. "You can have my car."

Jake nodded. He spit the chewing gum through his teeth, just across Louis' shoulder, and drove off. Louis climbed into the MP's three-quarter-ton truck. "Step on it," he said. Christine always needed an hour before she went to bed—doing things to her hair, creaming her face, massaging her gums. If the driver hurried, Louis would be there in time.

He thanked the MP for the ride and ran into the house. There was a large mirror at the turn of the marble stairway but Louis didn't stop to look at himself. He ran upstairs, taking two and three steps at a time. He had already passed General Briggs' apartment, when he remembered that there was nothing to drink upstairs. He turned around and opened the door to General Briggs' apartment. The lights in the hall were burning. By leaving the lights on all night, the general kept up the fiction of the Army's twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week schedule.

The air of the grand salon was heavy with stale smoke. The salon was a magnificent Louis Quinze affair, with carved oak panels and a blue-turquoise marble fireplace, but now it looked dreary and dirty with butts piled up in the ash trays and the untidy mess of glasses, bottles, paper scraps. Louis went to the bar which had been a balcony for the piano before General Briggs had hit upon the idea of making a bar out of the balcony.

Louis glanced over the large rows of bottles. You could always rely on Briggs for the best of the best. There was an excellent, seventy-five-year-old brandy. Briggs had been given

three bottles by a French industrialist. Louis preferred the brandy but Christine liked her liquor sweet and heavy, and this was Christine's night. He chose a bottle of Bols cocoa brandy and put it under his arm. He poured himself a glass of brandy, swallowed it and poured another.

Way back in the corridor, where General Briggs had his bedroom, Louis heard a door being opened. He turned around. He felt something wet on his hand and the smell of brandy.

Christine was coming out of General Briggs' bedroom.

Louis stood, unable to move or to open his mouth. She came walking through the corridor. She couldn't see him in the shadow of the balcony.

When she passed by the door, something made a gasping noise in his throat.

"*Well!*" she said. There was no trace of bewilderment in her voice. She seemed to be perfectly at ease; as if she had expected Louis to stand there. Her black satin gown seemed to be glued to her figure; she always wore black gowns. The gown was belted carelessly around her waist, bringing out the sharp swing of her hips. Louis was sure that she had nothing on underneath. She stood there, quiet and straight.

"So that's why I was supposed to go to Versailles," Louis said. His ears burned. His mind was a blank.

"Don't spill your drink, Louis," she said coolly. "That's the best brandy we ever had."

In the rear of the corridor, the bedroom door was opened and Louis heard the general's voice. "Were you talking to me, darling?"

Louis turned back and saw Briggs. The general was a hairy man with thin legs. He looked ridiculous in his O.D. underdrawers and his GI undershirt. The general always wore GI olive-colored undergarments. He stood there for a moment, and then he moved back into the merciful dimness of his bedroom and closed the door.

For a moment it occurred to Louis that this scene had all the ingredients of low humor, the high spot in an *opera bouffé*. The Husband, standing limp and unhappy at the bar, with the cognac spilled all over him. The Lover, putting in a hasty,

disgraceful appearance in short underwear. The Woman, cool and desirable to him and to everybody else in the audience. It was funny because unconsciously you would identify yourself with The Lover. Louis had played the part so many times in real life that he'd never bothered to stop and think of the unhappy third party, The Husband.

It was funny until he began to realize, slowly and painfully, that this time he was playing the wrong part. Somebody had made an awful mistake and he had been miscast in the part of the Betrayed Husband. He was through. He was through being The Hero, the protagonist, the youthful lover. He was the straight man now. He wasn't making the jokes any more. He had become the butt of the jokes.

Christine was talking. He was unable to make out the meaning of her words. She must have been talking to him for quite a while.

"Maybe it's better this way. Sooner or later you would have to know. Let me have a light, Louis."

She was holding a cigarette between her lips with two fingers. "Your lighter," she said impatiently, while he looked at her, unable to understand what she was saying.

He took out his lighter and fidgeted around. She took the lighter away from him and lighted the cigarette herself.

"Christ," she said, disgusted. "Let's discuss this like two grown-up people."

Louis cleared his throat. "And what about—about him?" He pointed toward the bedroom.

"Don't be an idiot, Louis. Corny is just the innocent bystander." She removed a bit of tobacco from her lip. "You almost remind me of my third husband, the ham actor. He loved to dramatize himself in life because he wasn't able to do it on the screen."

Louis was tired. If only he could fall asleep right there, so he wouldn't have to listen. If he could forget everything.

"You behave like a little boy who can't take it." She got up and paced the floor. "You've done this thing to other people so often. Now that it's hit right back into your face, you can't take it. . . ."

"Our marriage was always strictly a deal," she said. Her voice was as cold as a steel string covered with icicles. "I gave you what you married me for. Money, a social position, the gold leaves on your shoulders. But you never delivered. You fell flat down on the deal, my friend."

This is preposterous, he thought. Those lines. Let's get out and get our coats at the check room.

"What a fool you were! You thought you could put it over on me as you put it over on poor Claire. You were always careful not to pick the first-raters. But even the second-raters would catch on after a while. The sleek hand kisses, the bows and slick words didn't work any more. The women would notice that you always looked as if you had just come out of a barber's chair. Only by that time it would be too late—you would have got out of them whatever it was you wanted." She stubbed out her cigarette. "You even fooled *me* for a while."

She looked down at him expecting him to say something but he stood motionless taking his punishment, too groggy to dish it out himself.

"Whatever gave you the idea that you were the Old Continent's answer to the prayer of America's womanhood? Because a few bored or unhappy women fell for your line? You should have gone out of the big city into the country. You would have found the going pretty tough."

His muscles were paralyzed. He was so helpless he could have cried.

"You were a big bluff, darling," she said, and laughed. "The old charm doesn't work any more. Especially not in the bedroom."

He made an effort to speak up. "I can make plenty of trouble for you and—" he pointed at the corridor, "him."

That made her really laugh. "You'll keep your mouth shut, darling. You don't want me to spoil your promotion, career, and your future conquests of America? Suppose I should drop a hint to the other ladies? You would be through, Louis darling."

He didn't listen. He was trying to pick up the scraps and crumbs.

"Christine, let's forget everything. We'll make a fresh start. It isn't too late yet. I need you, Christine. I'm so lonely. . . ."

Something choked him up and then he broke down on the table, crying, "I'm so terribly lonely."

"Oh, my God," she said, with distaste. She poured him a drink. "Here. Take it. Take the whole bottle. Go to bed and stop feeling so goddamn sorry for yourself."

She went out into the corridor and back to Briggs' bedroom. She opened the door and closed it and locked it with a snap of the key. It sounded like the distant echo of a pistol shot.

He sat there, staring into space. Finally he picked himself up, and carried himself over to the bar. He poured himself a big glass of the seventy-five-year-old brandy. On the floor behind the bar was an old issue of the *Stars and Stripes*, which somebody must have left there. He was about to step on it. Then he noticed the picture on the front page. A woman's picture.

He stared at the photograph. He recognized Marion Mara at once. It was the same picture that he had seen a few years ago in the New York papers. The tight, sleek evening gown of black satin, the low cut bringing out the shape of her breasts. The impudent, challenging line of her thighs; the right leg thrust forward.

The accompanying story, date-lined Monte Carlo, was titled "S & S Correspondent Finds Former Nazi Star in Neutral Monte Carlo." Louis read:

Marion Mara, former German stage and screen star, personal friend of many leading Nazis, currently enjoys the climate and luxuries of Monte Carlo's neutrality, unworried about the American troops who are stationed less than five miles from the sumptuous hotel suite, where I found her today, registered under a false name. . . .

"This writer," Louis read on, "has evidence of at least one murder which has been committed by Marion Mara. The victim was a prominent lawyer who made the mistake of having an affair with Marion Mara in her pre-notorious days, and then

got rid of her by slapping her face in public. Nine years later this man was arrested and later found dead in the cell which Marion Mara had just left. . . ."

The words hit Louis' forehead, right between his eyes. He turned back to the front page. Then he saw the byline under the title of the story. Kamin's byline.

Louis tried to tell himself that this was a coincidence which was part of the war: like finding people alive whom one hasn't expected to ever meet again, or coming back to places one has seen in happier times. One must be rational about such things. Kamin, working for *Stars and Stripes*, had met and interviewed Marion Mara. Period. There could be no meaning behind this coincidence. There must not be.

He could see Marion, with his eyes closed. She was next to him on the couch in his father's room. She had on her black slip and then her black shoulder straps had come down. . . .

He could hear the laughter of his father. ". . . found dead in the cell which Marion Mara had just left."

Louis folded the paper and put it into his breast pocket. The glass with the seventy-five-year-old brandy was still half filled on the bar but Louis didn't touch it. He went into General Briggs' office and put a call through to Orly Field where the general's C-51 was parked in a hangar. It was barely a couple of hours' flying time to Monte Carlo.

31

AT FIRST SIGHT, nothing seemed to have changed as Kamin walked up the stairs of the Métro and stood in the middle of the Place Pigalle. The shapes and sounds and smells were familiar, the trees and neon lights and accordion music, the people sitting in front of the cafés, the crowds on the sidewalks of the Boulevard de Clichy.

Even the small things came back to Kamin. A few bulbs were still missing in the marquee of the movie house, though probably not the same that had been missing eight years ago. The sidewalk painters had their water colors propped up against the trees of the Boulevard. The tired, faded little ladies were still patrolling up and down, beating time with their high heels, looking a little more tired and faded, like Montmartre, but at night under the dim lights and the thick make-up, you hardly noticed the difference.

It seemed to Kamin as if he had left only yesterday. The women accordionists still played their old javas. From one of the better places came the sound of a brand-new American tune, "It Might As Well Be Spring." It was spring in America and it was spring in Montmartre, but, then, every night was make-believe spring in Montmartre.

It was all very confusing. Like in the theater when the curtain is lowered and raised again over the same scene to indicate a lapse of time. If you didn't look at the program notes, where it said, "Third Act—eight years later," you couldn't possibly know what was going on.

Kamin felt pleasantly inconspicuous in his civilian suit, one of his old French suits which he had taken to America eight years ago and which Britta had sent back to him. The suit still fitted him after four years in uniform. He had been separated from the American Army a few months after V-E Day. Though he had been anxious to return to America, he had taken a job as civilian with the Army in Europe, until Britta could come over. They would stay a few months in England and then they would go back to America—for good.

In the package containing the civilian suit, the shirts, the gaily patterned ties, Kamin had also found the first copy of his new book. According to a cable from his publishers, it had a good advance sale and had been discussed by the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*, all of which was rather surprising to Kamin who had never expected anything like that.

He walked down the rue Pigalle. It was like walking down one's past. Everything was coming back, the blurred contours of things took on clear, sharp edges, like a picture slowly mov-

ing into focus. The doormen in front of the night clubs, the shabby characters hanging out in front of the hotel entrances, the *flics* and girls and tourists. At the corner of the dark side street that led to Madame Soulanges' *maison*, a furtive-looking man was leaning against the wall. He had on a blue beret and a turtleneck sweater under his coat jacket.

"Will you beautiful girls?" the man asked.

"*Bébé!*" Kamin exclaimed. Then he saw that the man wasn't Bébé.

The man nodded. "I'm here for *le bébé*," he said. "*Le Bébé* and Laurette are getting married tonight. You one of his friends?"

Kamin nodded. "They wrote me. I'm invited."

"You'd better hurry," the man said, pointing at the Bar des Artistes. "The fête is in full swing."

Kamin crossed the street. The Bar des Artistes was crowded. Groups of people were drinking and talking in the entrance, and inside between the tables. Kamin looked around. Here and there he saw a face that seemed vaguely familiar but most of the people were strangers.

Fernande saw him first. She gave a cry and jumped down from her seat behind the cash register. Kamin felt himself embraced and kissed. Marcel dropped everything and came out from behind the bar. Everybody seemed to be shaking hands with Kamin, patting his shoulder.

"We knew you would come," Fernande said. "We expected you in the afternoon. It was a beautiful wedding. They were married at the high altar and the abbé Gabriel wore his beautiful *satin chasubles*——"

Marcel pointed toward the safe under the counter where Madame Roget had always kept the expensive champagnes *de marque*. Fernande took the key from a gold chain under her blouse. Marcel picked a bottle and filled the glasses. His arm, bony and thin, was shaking but Marcel managed to fill the glasses up to the brim without spilling a drop.

"*Alors*," Marcel said, taking a glass himself. "Here is to those who can't be with us here tonight."

Stuck into the mirror behind the counter was a picture of Madame and Monsieur Roget that had been taken before the war by the most expensive photographer of the *quartier*. Madame was sitting stiff and dignified and Monsieur Roget was leaning on the edge of her chair. A tricolor and a black satin band were wound around the picture.

It had become very quiet in the overcrowded café.

"They were good Frenchmen," Marcel said simply. Fernande cried and a few people blew their noses. Everybody finished his drink in silence.

The trouble of the Rogets had started when Fernande's baby fell sick with tuberculosis. Fernande's appeals to Marcel's father in America remained without answer. The child died during the second winter of the war.

Fernande collapsed. She wouldn't have lived if her mother hadn't taken care of her. Madame Roget turned out to be a woman of remarkable energy. "The dirty Boches will have to pay for that," she kept telling Fernande. When Fernande was able to work again, Madame Roget informed her casually that they were going to put out a secret newspaper with two Resistance men, who handled the editorial part. *Le bébé* and Laurette were going to print and distribute the paper. Laurette was Madame Soulanges' prettiest *pensionnaire*; two German general staff officers had been crazy about her but she preferred dangerous work for France to a comfortable life in Berlin.

The paper was printed on a cyclostated machine in Madame Roget's living room, under the very eyes of the Germans who were guzzling schnapps at the Bar des Artistes. Later Laurette installed the machine in her room at Madame Soulanges' *maison*.

Monsieur Roget had viewed these goings-on with alarm. He refused to take any part in "activities" which might jeopardize his future. But he too became converted when the Boches seized his small property near the Porte d'Italie.

When the Boches finally found out about the paper, after eight months of constant search, they shot the old man and sent Madame Roget to a camp in East Prussia where she died

a few months later. Fernande and *le bébé* escaped and were hidden by Madame Soulanges for thirteen months inside the brothel. Laurette disappeared and joined the Maquis in the Alpes Maritimes.

"*Alors, on ferme, messieurs et dames,*" Marcel now announced. "We are closing."

Everybody left. Most people had been invited to the celebration at Madame Soulanges' *maison*. Fernande slid down from her chair and took off her apron. While she fixed her hair in front of the mirror, she told Kamin that Madame Soulanges was going to retire, and *le bébé* and Laurette were taking over the management of the establishment.

"You'll be surprised," Fernande said. "Everything's redecorated. They've bought new chairs and new beds. Nothing is to remind people of the bad days."

"*La résurrection,*" Marcel explained. He came in from the living room, wearing his blue suit. He looked thin and tired. The suit seemed to be hanging on him like on a scarecrow. His hair was white and the left side of the back of his head was almost bald.

"He weighed forty-two kilos, when he came back, *mon pauvre chéri,*" Fernande said. She kissed him.

Marcel hugged her. "They didn't get me, though," he said. "Even my stomach trouble is gone. I don't have to run to the lavatory any more. There was a famous French doctor at the labor camp with me who said, 'Either you'll die of it or the Boches will cure you.' He was right."

"Why didn't you bring your wife with you?" Fernande asked.

"Britta will be here next week."

"You have a picture?"

Kamin had a dozen pictures. Britta on Fifth Avenue, Britta in Maryland, Britta in Coney Island, Britta behind the wheel of what Marcel called *une voiture formidable*. There was one picture of Britta with Carol, Jeff and Carol's baby.

"*Voilà* the young *capitaine*, who came here every night last year," Marcel said.

"*Qu'il était gentil,*" Fernande said. "He always protected me

against all the American soldiers. When I was busy, he would roll up his sleeves and help me behind the counter."

Kamin wondered what Grandfather Baldwin would say if he knew that Jeff had worked in a Montmartre café.

"Let's go," Marcel said. "They'll be waiting."

32

THE ENTRANCE of Madame Soulanges' *maison* was brightly illuminated with garlands of bulbs in different shades of red, from carmine to crimson to cerise and pink. Laurette had opposed the red lights in favor of ordinary light bulbs, but the bridegroom and Madame Soulanges had outvoted her. Madame pointed out that the red-light arrangement had great promotional value.

"One never knows how many prospective customers there may be among the wedding guests," *le bébé* agreed. "Let's not forget that we are running a business. *Les affaires sont les affaires.*"

It was finally decided to have a pink-and-white canopy built in front of the entrance. Across the whole side street ran an awning with the inscription GRANDE OUVERTURE ANNUELLE * PRIX REDUITS which *le bébé* had borrowed from M. Lafarge, the floor-walker at the Grand Galleries Duhancl. The inscription PRIX REDUITS had been pasted over with a paper saying BONNE CHANCE AUX NOUVEAUX MARIÉS but the paper had half come off in the breeze and now the PRIX REDUITS got mixed up with BONNE CHANCE AUX NOUVEAUX MARIÉS.

The bar-and-waiting room had been transformed into a banquet hall. All the clients of the *maison* had come to the

fête, many with their wives. A member of the borough administration was present; so was M. Sebastien, the *commissaire de police* and several former Resistance friends of the bride and groom. The gentlemen wore their dark suits, and the military wore their new uniforms with all decorations. Many of the ladies had new dresses, or at least their old dresses fixed up with new embroidery or new frills, made to look new.

The counter, upon which Kamin, *le bébé* and M. Brasseur, the policeman, had once placed the unconscious Mr. Overstreet, had been turned into a *buffet froid*, and there were large plates with cold meat, sausage, *hors d'oeuvres variés*, sardines, olives, potato salad, anchovies, *pâté de maison*, *oeufs durs mayonnaise*, Russian salad, herring filets, cold chicken. Bottles of red and white wine. Large sticks of bread.

Facing the buffet was the long *table d'honneur*, headed by the bride, the groom, Madame Soulanges and the abbé Gabriel. Laurette looked pretty and flowerlike in her white silk dress, which was a gift from her former friend, the *directeur* of the fashion house on the Faubourg St. Honoré. She had always wanted to be married in a white dress, with the church decorated with white carnations. *Le bébé* looked uncomfortable in a borrowed tuxedo, a stiff wing collar, and new shoes which creaked and were half a size too small. His hair was carefully brushed aside. The *pensionnaires* were sitting at the long table, looking strangely demure in their pink and white dresses. They had acted as bridesmaids and had been more excited than the bride herself. There had been some discussion in the *quartier* as to the advisability of having the *pensionnaires* act as bridesmaids, but the abbé Gabriel had ruled that it was quite all right, as long as the girls had been to the Holy Communion the first Friday of the month, and they had all been there.

They were talking all at the same time, a little self-conscious in their bridesmaids' gowns.

"I kept saying the words with Monsieur l'abbé," said one of the girls. "*Le mariage est une alliance sacrée, institué par Dieu même*——" She stopped and said, "How does it go, Monsieur l'abbé?"

"—*institué par Dieu même, et le symbole de l'union de Jesus Christ avec son Église,*" the abbé Gabriel said. He smiled at the girl. She had taken to coming to Mass on Sundays and looked like a fine prospect for Heaven.

The harmonium stood on a small platform next to the bar. Madame Soulanges had ruled out a costly dance orchestra and hired a harmonium player who used to come to the *maison* twice a week. He was satisfied with a supper and his expenses in recognition of the many happy hours he had spent at the house.

Kamin, Fernande and Marcel were seated at the head of the table, next to *le bébé* and the bride.

"This monsieur," *le bébé* said to the girls, "is an American. Remember, Kamin, how I used to get sore when you said you wanted to go to America?"

"You never liked the idea, *bébé*," Kamin said.

Le bébé shook his head sadly. "I changed my mind. We all did. If we could, today we would all swim to get to America."

Laurette told Fernande that all the delicacies on the *buffet froid* were gifts from customers. "The red wine came from a former cabinet member. The champagne is from a senator. He used to come here during the Occupation to meet another politician. They didn't dare to be seen together in public, so one would come here and then I would run over and fetch the other man, and they would meet in my room. They never went with the girls. They would just sit in my room, talk and play a game of cards."

Le bébé wanted to show Kamin the new place. "First thing we did when the Americans liberated Paris, we had the whole place deloused. It needed it too."

"How do you like the new wallpaper design, monsieur?" Laurette asked. "Another gift from an old friend."

"It's good to be in a business where one makes friends easily," Madame Soulanges said.

Le bébé took Kamin upstairs and proudly showed him the rooms. "Look at the beds. New mattresses, the blankets filled with goose feathers."

Madame Soulanges pointed at a little clip which she wore on her dress. "Remember that?"

"A Phi Beta Kappa key," said Kamin.

"It belonged to Monsieur Over-street. We found the key a few days later but you had already left for America. Nothing ever gets lost here, Monsieur. I had the key reworked and wore it as good luck charm during the Occupation."

"What happened to M. Brasseur, the policeman?" Kamin asked.

Marcel spat out under the table and *le bébé* said, "We don't mention the louse any more."

"*Le nom est merde*," Marcel said. "*Je vous demande pardon, monsieur l'abbé*. But he was really no-good *crapule*. Became a police spy when the Boches came in."

The harmonium player was still playing and the *pensionnaires* were singing under the direction of the abbé Gabriel who was beating time with a fork.

*En passant par la Lorraine avec mes sabots
Recontrais trois capitaines,
Oh! Oh! Oh! avec mes sabots.
Ils m'ont appelé vilaine
Je ne suis pas si vilaine, avec mes sabots,
Puisque le fils du roi m'aime. . . .*

"Too bad that Britta can't be here with us," Fernande said to Kamin.

"Yes," Kamin said. "It's quite a wedding."

"And Jeff," Fernande said. "*Qu'il était gentil*."

"There are some nice Americans if you look around long enough," *le bébé* admitted.

"*Dis donc*," Marcel said. "What happened to the *type* whom I had to throw out of the bar?"

"*Ah oui*," Fernande said. "The one with the springs in his shoes. Wasn't he wearing a corset? What was his name?"

"Louis," Kamin said.

"What happened to him?" Fernande asked.

"It's quite a story," Kamin said.

"You sound *très mystérieux*," Fernande said.

"Well, in a way, it *is* a mystery," Kamin said.

Le bébé finished his glass of champagne and lit a cigarette for Laurette. "I like mysteries," he said.

"I don't know if anyone can solve this one—I worked on it for some time myself." Kamin drew a typewritten report out of his pocket. "Here's an Army report on Louis—it's as much as I know. I knew you would ask me about him, so I brought this along."

"But that's written in English," Fernande said.

"*Alors, quoi*, one can translate it," Marcel said. "Go ahead, Kamin, tell it in French so even the women will understand."

Kamin glanced over the report, typed, spaced and indented in Army style. Across the head of the first page ran the word CONFIDENTIAL. But the war had been over a long time.

"Anybody heard of Marion Mara?" he said.

"The German actress?" said *le bébé*.

"I once saw her at the Folies," Fernande said. "She was with the German ambassador. She always was with the big ones."

"She was Louis' first woman," Kamin said.

"*Merde alors*," Marcel said.

"She ought to be tried and executed," Fernande said.

"She was living in a sumptuous three-room suite in Monte Carlo when I saw her," Kamin said dryly.

"*Ça alors*," Laurette said.

Le bébé shrugged. "She's too handsome to be tried by the Americans," he said. "They'll wait a couple of years and ship her to Hollywood."

"It all started when I went down to Monte Carlo on an assignment for *Stars and Stripes*," Kamin said. "I found her and wrote a story about her. It seems that Louis read the story here in Paris and later went down to Monte Carlo. That's the last thing we know about him for sure. The rest is in here." He pointed at the report, which began:

THE CONTINENTAL TOUCH

PROVOST MARSHAL'S OFFICE
CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION DIVISION

SEC. No. 10

APO 887, c/o POSTMASTER

NEW YORK, N.Y.

PXXPX 190.2

17 January 1946

SUBJECT: Louis de Linc, Lieut. Col. AUS, 0-6991162

To: Commanding General

Supreme Headquarters

Allied Expeditionary Force

APO 757, c/o PM New York, N.Y.

ATTENTION: CID

Kamin turned the page and started at the head of the second page where it said:

MEMORANDUM REPORT

RE: Louis de Linc (Delinc, Dellinick) Lt. Col., AUS,

0-6991162

REFERENCE: Confidential Letter, Headquarters Provost Marshal General, APO 887, c/o Postmaster, New York, N.Y.

DETAILS:

1. This agent, on January 15, 1946, investigated the above-mentioned case and found this to have happened:

2. On January 9, 1946, at 1533, Lt. Col. Louis de Linc arrived at Nice airport from Paris Orly Field in Major General Cornwall Briggs' personal C-51 plane. He checked in at the Negresco Hotel at 1715 and was given room 87 on the second floor. He left the hotel ten minutes later. He hired Lucien Sorel, civilian, French, taxi driver, to take him in his Citroen '36 to Monte Carlo.

3. Upon entering the Principality of Monaco, the car was stopped by the Military Police. Lt. Col. de Linc identified himself by special pass, USFET, United States Forces European Theater, and was permitted to pass. They arrived in Monte Carlo at 1804. Sorel was ordered to go to the Hotel de Paris. According to the desk clerk, Jean Pietri, civilian, Lt. Col. de Linc asked for the room of Marion Mara, ac-

tress, German. Marion Mara had been living at the Hotel de Paris since March 3, 1945. (Copy of Hotel Record Enclosed.) According to Louis Severin, civilian, French, hotel manager, Marion Mara paid her bills every week, received no letters, had no visitors. She went to the Casino every afternoon, was observed gambling at *trente et quarante* for high stakes. She was living in the three-room suite 109. Asked by desk clerk Pietri whether he should announce him, Lt. Col. de Linc answered *verbatim*: "Don't call her. I want to surprise her. I've got special orders."

4. The nature of Lt. Col. de Linc's special orders has not been established by this agent.

5. Lt. Col. de Linc was seen going to room 109 at 1807. He reappeared about one hour later, accompanied by Marion Mara. According to desk clerk, Pietri, it was "not yet seven o'clock." *However*, according to Rolande Menotti, civilian, Italian, chambermaid, it was "a quarter past seven." This time difference may or may not be significant. Chambermaid Menotti (Testimony Enclosed) said, "They looked 'the way couples always look after spending an hour in a hotel room.'" Desk clerk Pietri dismissed this statement as "utter rot." (Testimony Enclosed.) "A typical woman's imagination," said manager Severin.

6. Marion Mara left her room key at the desk. She said she was going to Nice with Lt. Col. de Linc. (She pronounced the name "Dellinick." This agent has been unable to account for this inaccuracy.) According to desk clerk Pietri there was "something shiny" in Marion Mara's handbag. "I don't know what it was. Being an old hotel employee I'm not given to prying into the handbags of our guests. It may have been a revolver or it may not have been a revolver." (Testimony Enclosed.) Manager Severin says, "This is the finest hotel in Monte Carlo. . . . Our guests never carry revolvers with them." (Testimony Enclosed.) This difference of opinion may or may not be significant.

7. At about 1915 (#5) Lt. Col. de Linc and Marion Mara boarded Sorel's taxicab. Col. de Linc ordered Sorel to go back to the Negresco Hotel in Nice. Having no rear mir-

ror, Sorel was unable to observe his passengers. "I'm sure, though, they were sitting *bien serré* (pretty close)," he says. Sorel testifies that he had *not* overheard any details of their conversation. They arrived at the Hotel Negresco at 1950. Sorel was told by Lt. Col. de Linc, "I want you to be back at the hotel at midnight, sharp." This was confirmed by Simon Obolensky, doorman of the Negresco Hotel. "*Je suis sur qu'il disait à minuit, exactement*" ("I'm sure he said at midnight sharp"). (Testimony Enclosed.)

8. Lt. Col. de Linc took Marion Mara straight to his room. He rang for the room waiter, and ordered a bottle of champagne and sandwiches from J. B. Lenormand, civilian, French, waiter. Lenormand (Testimony Enclosed) delivered the order at 2000. Passing by the door between 2140 and 2150, Lenormand reports that he didn't hear any noise, and the lights were *on* in the room. According to doorman Obolensky, standing on the Promenade des Anglais, in front of the hotel, the lights were *out*. This difference may or may not be significant.

9. Lt. Col. de Linc and Marion Mara came down the stairway at 2340. He left order at the desk for taxi-driver Sorel, "to wait here until we come back." He repeated this order to doorman Obolensky. "*Demandez qu'il nous attend.*" ("Make sure that he waits for us.")

10. At 2355 Brigadier Gaston Tommasi, Nice Metropolitan police department, saw Lt. Col. de Linc and Marion Mara, while making his midnight patrol along the beach. According to Brigadier Tommasi (Testimony Enclosed), "they were getting into one of the three small rowboats which the Negresco keeps near a cabana for the convenience of their guests." These boats have one pair of oars and hand rudder. "I warned him that a storm warning had been given earlier in the evening and he said, 'that's all right. We'll be back in a while.' . . . I noted that he was carrying a gun in his holster. I remembered it distinctly because he was wearing a Luger. I was surprised that he had a German instead of an American weapon."

11. At 0035, Désiré Metzinger, civilian, French, saxo-

phone player at the Negresco Hotel, heard four pistol shots which seemed to come from "way out on the sea." According to Metzinger (Testimony Enclosed), "I'm sure it was thirty-five minutes past midnight because I looked at my wristwatch on which it was forty-five past but my watch is always ten minutes fast, on account of my being always late for work. I had gone out to smoke a cigarette and crossed the Promenade des Anglais. I was alone. They were playing 'White Christmas,' of which we have lost the saxophone part. I heard four shots, three in rapid succession and then one. . . . Or maybe there were two shots and then a pause and again two shots. *However*, I'm not so sure now, maybe there was one shot first, and three following in rapid succession."

12. Official search for the two missing persons was started on January 10, 1946, at 1130, after two fishermen had reported that an empty rowboat had been seen drifting out on the sea. The oars were lying inside. There was no sign of any struggle. The bottom of the boat was covered with four inches of water. Early in the morning there had been a rainstorm. (Weather Report Enclosed.)

13. The bodies of Lt. Col. de Linc and of Marion Mara have not been found. According to the expert judgment of André Marie Pierre St. Jean, of the Société Niçoise des Pêcheurs (Nice Fishermen's Association), "It is quite improbable that the bodies will ever be found. There was a heavy rainstorm and the high tide would take them out into the ocean. . . . May God let them rest in peace." (Report Enclosed.)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Owing to the facts that Lt. Col. de Linc said to taxi-driver Sorel "I want you to wait for us here at midnight sharp" (#7); that he repeated to doorman Obolensky, "Make sure that he (Sorel) waits for us" (#9); that he said to Brigadier Tommasi, "We'll be back in a while" (#10): it can be assumed that Lt. Col. de Linc intended to take Marion Mara back to Monte Carlo.

The conclusion is that *Lt. Col. de Linc was shot and killed by Marion Mara* at 0035 (#11), either by her own weapon if she had any (#6), or by Lt. Col. de Linc's Luger pistol, which she may have grabbed from him. After throwing the body of Lt. Col. de Linc overboard, Marion Mara then killed herself. Facing a trial as war criminal, she may have become panicky when being cross-examined by Lt. Col. de Linc and in despair decided to kill him and then herself, in order to escape fair trial and just punishment for her crimes.

For his supreme sacrifice beyond and above the call of duty Lt. Col. de Linc has been posthumously decorated with the Legion of Merit.

It is recommended that the case be closed.

LUCIEN CAROTTE
Special Agent, CID
Provost Marshal's Office
APO 887, c/o Postmaster
New York, N.Y.

Kamin put the report back into his pocket.

"*Ça alors,*" Fernande said. "That was quite a story, Kamin."

"*Je l'émmerde, ce type-là,*" Marcel said. "He got what he deserved."

"I don't get it," Fernande said. "It doesn't make sense. He didn't have to take that woman on a boat ride at midnight. He should have known she was preparing a trap. Lots of people get bumped off that way. You don't take a boat ride at night with a Boche whore."

The *pensionnaires* were forming a line around the table, their arms interlocked, and their shoulders were swaying back and forth in rhythm, as they were singing

*Auprès de ma blonde
Qu'il fait bon dormir.*

"Maybe," Kamin said, "he didn't get bumped off."

"What?" Fernande said.

"*Voilà le mystère,*" *le bébé* said, rubbing his hands.

"Suppose," Kamin said, "it was the other way around? Suppose Louis wanted to kill her? Suppose he got her into the boat, shot her and afterwards killed himself?"

Fernande sat up straight. Marcel whistled softly through his teeth. "*Sapristi,*" he said.

"I went down to Monte Carlo a few weeks after I read about Louis' death," Kamin said. "I spoke to all the people mentioned in the report."

"You found out anything?" Marcel said.

"No. They all told me the same story."

"But then," Fernande said, "I don't see what gives you that idea that he killed her first."

Kamin shrugged. "I don't know myself," he said after a while. "I can't prove it. I just feel that it may have happened that way. Louis had a reason to kill her. He'd always been very devoted to his father."

"*Voilà le motif,*" *le bébé* said.

"But did he also have a reason to kill himself?" Fernande asked.

"I don't know," Kamin said.

Marcel said, "*Merde alors,* you knew him, didn't you?"

Kamin was silent. Had he really known Louis? He had been watching him from the sidelines ever since they had been kids but he had never been close to him. Nobody had ever been close to Louis.

Louis had always been lonely. Lonely in the house of his parents. Lonely among his friends whom he didn't trust. Lonely with the women he didn't want to love. To love is always to die a little but Louis had never let himself die.

Fernande said, "Is the case closed?"

"Officially," Kamin said, "it is closed."

The *pensionnaires* were still singing, their heads and shoulders swaying lightly. *Le bébé* went over to the buffet and shoved an *oeuf dur mayonnaise* into his mouth.

The harmonium player was playing "Paris Je T'aime," and the *pensionnaires* began to clean up the buffet, snatching at

little ends of meat and sweets. There was the smell of garlic and stale cigarette smoke. Kamin was tired of the smell, of the sounds and of the people. Suddenly, and quite strongly, he was seized by the yearning for different smells, sounds and people. The swishing sound of tires on a six-lane highway. The taste of freshly made hamburger. Drugstores with an arrangement of food counters and laxative posters side by side. The sickening feeling of going down in an express elevator. Excellent radio programs with silly commercials but you could always turn off the commercials. Nobody forced you to listen; nobody forced you to do anything. Ice-cream cones, roach powders and Alka Seltzer. The glaring light over the desert of Arizona. The overpowering sense of space and more space. Dixie cups and children shouting on wide green playgrounds, grocery shelves and watching lower Manhattan from a Staten Island ferryboat. And the people. Mostly the people. Generous people and what's-in-it-for-me people, tough and soft people, girls with pretty legs and old women still talking their Old Country language, people with a positive attitude, eager to laugh, curse, shout, act, giving up their jobs, going West, going East, going any place they goddamn pleased. Selling things and buying things, always eager to start and full of profanity, generosity, crap games, whiskey sours and juke boxes.

Kamin walked down the rue Pigalle with Fernande and Marcel. The morning was tired.

"Was Louis married?" Fernande asked.

"Yes," Kamin said.

"What happened to her?"

"They sent her a telegram," Kamin said. "But she never got it. It must have wound up in a waste basket."

"Where is she now?"

"She married again. A general."

They stood in front of the Bar des Artistes. Fernande looked up the rue Pigalle. Way back the whitish contours of Sacré Coeur stood out of the dawn.

"I can't help feeling sorry for him," she said. "Here he's been and gone, and nobody cared."

Poor Louis, Kamin thought. He wouldn't have liked that obituary. He had dreaded pity more than anything else.

Marcel playfully kicked a stone into the gutter.

"Well, it's all over." He shrugged. "Come on, *chérie*," he said to Fernande. "About time we went to bed."

THE END

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